5 Organizational Communication Research: Key Moments, Central Concerns, and Future Challenges

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This chapter summarizes the state of theory and research in organizational communication. The authors highlight the central concerns and major challenges addressed by organizational communication researchers. They begin by isolating the central intellectual and practical currents, and then they identify defining and constituting concepts in organizational communication. The chapter concludes with the authors’ proposals of fruitful areas for future research.

More than a generation ago, Katz and Kahn (1966) argued that organizations are best conceptualized as open systems in which the behavior of members takes on a structure that is properly viewed at a collective, organizational level. In contrast to earlier perspectives that concentrated almost exclusively on the individual psychology and interpersonal relations among organizational members, the open-systems view emphasized that organizations are...
psychological, social, and symbolic constructions in and through which individuals respond to their environments. Control mechanisms such as norms and rules serve to curtail strictly individual needs in favor of wider organizational ones. In this manner, organizations function by balancing the changing demands of the environment with control mechanisms that guard against potentially overwhelming uncertainty.

Katz and Kahn thus framed individual action within a network of relationships, in effect foregrounding communication in the construction and enactment of organizations. This dynamic perspective on organizations—central to the open-systems view—simultaneously stressed the role of interconnectedness and the inherent importance of the external environment. Absent from the perspective, however, was an explicit focus on social interaction per se, an oversight soon redressed in Weick’s (1979) claim that through processes of enactment, selection, and retention, organizational members construct their organizations through communicative processes.

In Weick’s view, organizational members create their environments through enactment, or ongoing interaction, that emphasizes the phenomena to which they pay attention. They then select from among many possible interpretations of the enacted environment, thus attaining a degree of collective sensemaking through communication. Finally, members retain the interpretations that seem to work for them, setting up a locus of choice for future patterns of interaction and attention (enactment). It is through communication, Weick suggested, that we continually construct the reality of which we are a part and engage in “retrospective sensemaking” in order to rationalize the meanings of our actions. Communication is the core process in organizations, or, in Weick’s terms, the core process of organizing.

Communication is thus viewed as organizing—constituting organizations and not just occurring within them. Weick both precipitated and navigated the shift from the metaphor of the organization as “container” of communication to a view of communication as fundamental to the study of organizations. This shift has been crucial to the development of organizational communication as a distinct area of study, away from the strictly container view predominant from the 1940s to the 1960s and toward perspectives that explicitly consider communication phenomena as central processes of organizing (Cheney & Christensen, 2000; Farace, Monge, & Russell, 1977; Monge, 1973; Smith, 1993; Taylor, 1993). At the same time, however, this devaluing has come at some cost to the discipline.

In examining the state of contemporary organizational communication research, we stand to learn from the open-systems perspective and its dual emphasis on the environment as a source of organizational input and on the importance of diverse communication phenomena in organizations. In view of current social, political, technological, and economic developments, the centrality of the environment and the diversity of communication processes are critical to the study of organizational communication, with a far greater magnitude than a generation ago. Pressures toward globalization, new types of social movements and organizations, tensions between integration and segregation, team-based restructuring, the imperative of customer service, and the rise of network and virtual organizations, to name only a few developments, suggest ways in which contemporary organizational communication theories and concerns parallel, and of course expand, open-systems perspectives initiated a generation ago.

At the same time, we have recently come to appreciate organizational “closedness,” in its dialectical relationship with openness, as organizational boundaries become problematic (see Luhmann, 1990). That is to say, with greater fluidity of organizational boundaries there is a concomitant desire to reassert organizational identity and to maintain coherence and cohesion. In this regard, we invoke the systems perspective (Poole, 1997) and, later in this essay, interpretivism (the other predominant perspective on organizational communication during the past two decades) as heuristics for clarifying current themes in the study of organizational communication.

In this essay we highlight the central concerns and major challenges addressed by organizational communication researchers who study the communication-related aspects of diverse organizational phenomena in the world today. We proceed by first examining key moments in the study of organizational communication in order to sketch central intellectual and practical currents. We explicate both “explicit” and “implicit” histories of the field, treat reviews of the metatheoretical perspectives and methodological orientations in organizational communication, and then describe the interpretive and critical “turn” in the field during the 1980s. Throughout this discussion, we identify defining and constituting concepts of organizational communication. In the final section we review continuing preoccupations in organizational communication research, and we propose areas for further work and exploration. Cutting across theoretical, methodological, and practical concerns, we hope to challenge researchers to confront directly the complexities of contemporary organizational environments and communication processes.

KEY MOMENTS IN THE HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

In order to examine where the field of organizational communication has been, and thus where it is going, we propose to delineate its historical development, outline its theoretical perspectives and methodological orientations, and examine prevalent research topics to date. In doing so, we focus on organizational communication’s “explicit” history, or its documented and recounted pedigree, as well as on its “implicit” history, or factors that are typically overlooked in such “recipe” treatments. In turn and in the subsequent section, we detail the evolution of the field’s interpretive/critical turn in an effort to provide a richer understanding of roots, key moments, and directions.
Explicit History

Although the study of organizational communication phenomena in a second and in the developmental stage of organizational communication is generally located in the 1940s and 1950s (Putnam & Cherney, 1983; Bessette, 1985; Redding & Tompkins, 1988), three sources account for the discipline's conceptual roots: traditional rhetorical theory, social psychology, and organizational theory. (Redding & Tompkins, 1988). The discipline is arguably the academic field of organizational communication, organizational behavior, industrial psychology, and communication. In tracing the emergence of organizational communication as an academic field, Redding and Tompkins (1988) have traced three major periods of development: the early development (1900-1940), the emphasis on hypothesis testing (1940-1970), and the emphasis on the development of organizational communication (1970-1983). According to Redding (1983), it was during the early development period that the seeds of organizational communication were planted, largely through the efforts of early scholars and the birth of organization's communication. Following the development of organizational communication as an academic discipline, several social science programs, and the birth of organizational communication as a separate discipline, organizational communication has proliferated and efforts were made to develop the theoretical premises and philosophical bases of organizational communication.

Implicit History

Clair (in press) questions the utility of defining and articulating the explicit history of organizational communication at all, due to issues of self-definition, legitimacy, and the “diversified heritage” of organizational communication. According to Clair, the discipline is characterized by a lack of a single “official” or “recognized” perspective, characterized by a lack of a single underlying theory or model of communication. Instead, the discipline is characterized by a diversity of perspectives, each with its own set of theories and models. Accordingly, Clair argues that the history of organizational communication is best understood as a series of overlapping conversations that have emerged from diverse sources, each with its own set of central issues and questions.
and strategies; culture and symbolism; information flow and channels; power and influence; positive outcomes of communication; decision making and problem solving; communication networks; cognitive, communication, and management styles; organization-environment communication interface; technology; language and message content; structure; uncertainty and information adequacy; groups and organizational effectiveness; ethics; cross-cultural research; climate; and theoretical advances. We can thus see an expansion of organization communication’s scope, especially since 1980, to include a broader range of topics and research perspectives.

Perhaps the most wide-ranging review of the development of organizational communication research is that provided by Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman (1996; see also Putnam, 1998). These reviewers identify seven “metaphor clusters” that, implicitly or explicitly, have framed lines of research in organizational communication and their attendant views of communication: conduit, in which organizations are treated as containers or channels for information flow and communication is seen as transmission of messages; lens, in which organizations are conceived as perceptual systems or eyes for environmental scanning, gatekeeping, and the like, and communication is filtered; linkage, in which organizations are represented as networks or systems of nodes linked by communication that functions to connect them; performance, in which organizations emerge as coordinated actions—the performative result of communicative social interactions; symbol, in which members’ interpretive communication activities produce organizations as novels; voice, in which “communication is expression and organization becomes a chorus of stilled or singing voices” (p. 379); and discourse, in which organizations appear as texts consisting of genres and dialogues, manifestations of communication as conversation. Most interesting about this review is Putnam et al.’s recognition of the variety of understandings of communication itself as embedded in different studies of organizational communication.

**Allied Perspectives**

Beyond historical perspectives on the evolution of scholarly emphases, organizational communication research also has been located in metatheoretical stances that are roughly consistent with Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) classic two-dimensional typology of schools of sociological thought and inquiry. The dimensions address assumptions about (a) the nature of social science (objectivist/subjectivist) and (b) the nature of society (maintenance or regulation/enlightenment or radical change). When the two dimensions are crossed, four main paradigms emerge. Briefly, **functionalists** view reality as significantly external to the individual’s experience of it and behavior as concrete and tangible. Research within this paradigm aims to arrive at empirical knowledge by means of scientifically rigorous methods, as traditionally understood. **Radical humanists** take reality to be socially and intersubjectively constructed, yet ultimately dominated by the ideological factors that individuals both create and maintain. **Radical structuralists** view society as objective, like functionalists, but by contrast view many aspects of the social order as oppressive and dominating. Their goal is to attempt to uncover the sources of this oppression. **Interpretivists** view reality as socially constructed by the interplay of individuals’ subjective experiences, and research is aimed at uncovering the nature and role of symbolic forms that maintain social order. Unfortunately, these terms have sometimes been employed in simplistic ways (especially so with functionalism) that ignore both metatheoretical assumptions and blurred genres (Cheney, in press; Geertz, 1973).

Scholars have applied Burrell and Morgan’s model to organizational communication (e.g., Daniels & Spiker, 1994; Putnam, 1983), despite the fact that its importation from sociology necessarily neglects research traditions actually reflected in organizational communication (Clair, in press; Mummy & Stohl, 1996). For example, Putnam (1982) used Burrell and Morgan’s typology to examine the basic assumptions underlying research on prevalent concerns of communication channels, networks, communication climates, supervisor-subordinate communication, and symbol systems in organizations. She noted the contribution that each paradigm can make to the study of organizational communication phenomena and outlined problematic applications as well. Later, Rosengren (1993) observed that, due to political and intellectual changes, the relative importance of the Burrell-Morgan typology’s two major dimensions (objective/subjective versus regulation/change) has shifted toward the objective/subjective side. He called for cross-fertilization across this divide to invigorate the study of communication. Although the typology provides a structure by which to organize theoretical perspectives, the boundaries between these perspectives should be seen as somewhat fluid. More recently, Deetz (1996) and Mummy (1997a) have both reconfigured the typology for special application to organizational communication, recognizing subtle distinctions between and among different postures toward interpretation and critique.

Alternatively, Euske and Roberts (1987) have noted traditional organizational metatheories (classical-structural, human relations, behavioral decisions, and systems theory) and have offered recent organizational theory perspectives that assume a distinct organization-environment view. They demonstrate how resource-dependence, population ecology/organizational life-cycle, and institutionalization theories all address complex and important relations between organizations and their environments, and they encourage increased attention to this relationship among organizational communication researchers. Especially, Euske and Roberts call attention to some of the physical and biological structures and constraints of organizing.

**Communication-Centered Approaches**

Krone, Jablin, and Putnam (1987) developed a more communication-oriented perspective for classifying theoretical paradigms by pointing out that researchers’ views on human communication guide the study of organizational phenomena. Krone et al. mapped four conceptual frameworks (mechanistic, psychological,
interpretive-symbolic, and systems-interaction), each reflecting basic assumptions about human communication. The mechanistic view of communication makes a goal of communicators explicit and visible to others. The systems view assumes that the communication system is an evolving system. From this perspective, the sequences of communication behaviors are considered the locus of communication. Adopting an essentially psychological view of communication, researchers have, in the past, underestimated the role of communication in the social construction of social reality. However, the turn toward social constructionism has emphasized the role of communication in the social construction of social reality.

Other theories of communication have been grounded in the view that organizations are characterized by the way information is organized, disseminated, and interpreted. This view has been influential in the study of communication in organizations. The communication process is composed of complementarity, but distrust theoretical, and methodological perspectives. Redding and Tompkins (1983) note modern, scientific, and scientific management perspectives. They emphasize the importance of managing communication in organizations. Communication is seen as a process of managing information, which is represented in the form of symbols.

In summary, the communication process is characterized by the way information is organized, disseminated, and interpreted. Communication is seen as a process of managing information, which is represented in the form of symbols. The communication process is composed of complementarity, but distrust theoretical, and methodological perspectives. Redding and Tompkins (1983) note modern, scientific, and scientific management perspectives. They emphasize the importance of managing communication in organizations. Communication is seen as a process of managing information, which is represented in the form of symbols.
this essay are those of researchers working within the systems tradition: self-organizing systems theory (Contractor, 1994), reticulation theory (Corman & Scott, 1994), public goods perspectives (Fulk, Flanagan, Kalman, Monge, & Ryan, 1996; Monge et al., 1998), assimilation perspectives (Jablin, 1987; Kramer, 1993), and adaptive structuration theory (Poole & DeSanctis, 1990). Similarly, investigations arising out of the community of scholars with a systems orientation are central to the emerging research foci we identify later: technology (Corman, 1997), groups and organizations (DeSanctis & Poole, 1997; Lammers & Krikorian, 1997; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996), networks (Heald, Contractor, Koehly, & Wasserman, 1998; Monge & Contractor, 2000; Rice, 1993; Stohl, 1993a), change (Lewis & Seibold, 1996; Miller, Johnson, & Grau, 1994), and globalization (Monge & Fulk, 1999; Stohl, 2000). As but one example of current activity in these areas, the 1997 Alta conference was devoted to the theme of “self-organizing processes,” especially to generative mechanisms of various social systems that help systems both “know themselves” and create the conditions necessary for social reproduction and adaptation. Further, this same subject was the topic of a jointly sponsored theme session between the Organizational Communication and Information Systems Divisions at the 1998 ICA conference, and papers from these sessions appeared subsequently in a “Dialogue” section of Management Communication Quarterly (Contractor, 1999; Hawes, 1999; Houston, 1999; Krippendorff, 1999). Finally, important conceptual, technological, and methodological advances have emanated from researchers in this area: computational modeling (Hyatt, Contractor, & Jones, 1997), collaborative technologies (Contractor, Zink, & Chan, 1998; Flanagan, in press), and methods for coding and data-analytic techniques (Holmes & Poole, 1991; Poole & DeSanctis, 1992).

THE INTERPRETIVE MOVEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

The year 1981 was a critical time for organizational communication studies, for during that summer a group of communication scholars met at a mountain retreat just south of Salt Lake City, Utah, to consider where the field had been and where it should be going. The outcome of this summer conference was a volume edited by Putnam and Pacanowsky (1983) that has become a landmark in the evolution of the field and in the field’s narrative about itself. The contributors to that volume pointed the way to more adventurous approaches to the conduct of research than were previously recognized as valid. In a real sense, the conference and the book signaled a commitment to the establishment of a genuine discipline of organizational communication, in the full academic meaning of that term. It brought to the center of our attention two concepts of research that are referred to as interpretivism and critical perspectives (Putnam, 1983).

In retrospect, there seem to have been two principal motives behind the rethinking of the bases of the field of study that led to the Alta conference and Putnam and Pacanowsky’s book. The first was a determination to distance organizational communication research somewhat from the preoccupations of management. As we have noted in our discussion above of the reviews by Redding (1985) and Redding and Tompkins (1988), the field of organizational communication began as a practical concern with teaching communication skills to people in organizations. Practitioners tended to take on the attitudes of their managerial partners: a kind of top-down view of organizational process and structure, not unlike that prevalent in management science. The people at Alta were determined to stake out an independent role for organizational communication research, one that was clearly distinct from that taught in business schools. That motive still seems to be operative (Mumby & Stohl, 1996).

The second motivation can be traced to a growing dissatisfaction with the then-prevailing mode of research and its restrictive view of what constitutes both data and theory. The social sciences in North America had for some time subscribed to a version of research that emphasizes the centrality of attributions of cause and effect, the necessity for a precise operational definition of variables, the meticulous collection and categorization of data, investigator objectivity, and quantitative (preferably statistical) analysis. This amalgam of commitments has been variously termed positivism, functionalism, and operationalism, although none of these terms would be accepted today as fully representative because each stands for no more than one of the component elements of strict empiricism, typically associated with some particular school or author. By the end of the 1970s, empiricism, to use the term that is most neutral in its associations, was drawing fire because it so limited research possibilities that some believed it had become an intellectual straitjacket. The Alta conference thus had some of the qualities of a manifesto in that it announced an opening up to new kinds of research.

Intellectual Roots of the Interpretive Tradition

In outlining alternatives, the innovators could draw on a rich 20th-century intellectual tradition. Two principal influences can be seen in the transformation of perspective from empiricism to interpretivism: phenomenology and structuralism, or, more specifically, semiotics. The two great innovators of 20th-century phenomenology were German professors: Husserl (1964, 1976) and Heidegger (1962). Husserl’s particular contribution was to turn attention to the cognitive processes involved in arriving at knowledge. He reminded us that knowledge is not simply a recording of experience but an active construction of it, in which the categories we begin with delimit what we can subsequently know. Heidegger, the more radical of the two thinkers, challenged the entire tradition of Western philosophy, and its preoccupation with prejudice-free knowledge, by reiterating the situatedness of all experience and the circumstantial limits
such situatedness precludes any empirical inquiry that aims to produce value-free findings. In its pristine expression in Husserl’s phenomenology, it is dubiously abstract and almost inaccessible to any but professional philosophers. It has evolved by becoming an important influence on social research; it is now the most threads of the interpretive turn in sociological research. The interpretive turn is characterized by a demand that researchers participate in the events they study, that they bring their own perspectives to bear on the data, and that they strive to understand and explain the phenomena they observe in their own terms.

The interpretive turn in communication studies is an important development of this tradition. It has been heavily influenced by the work of John Urry, who argued that communication is a fundamental aspect of social life. He developed a theory of “critical praxis” which emphasizes the role of communication in shaping social reality. This approach has been influential in a number of fields, including media studies, organizational communication, and cultural studies. The interpretive turn has also been characterized by a focus on the situatedness of communication, emphasizing the role of context and interpretation in the production and understanding of meaning. This has led to a greater emphasis on the construction of meaning and the role of power in communication processes.
unanimous. The rhetorical perspective on organization reveals a complication of Aristotle’s rhetorical situation (with its elements of speaker, message, and audience) today, messages often exist in public discourse without clearly identifiable sources, the discrete message may not be as important as a broader pattern of discourse, and audiences internal and external to the organization are likely to be both heterogeneous and overlapping (Cheney & Frenette, 1993; Heath, 1994). Organizational rhetoric then becomes a delicate balancing act of taking positions that are representative, but not alienating, a challenge well illustrated by Cheney’s (1991) study of the public positions of the Roman Catholic Church on controversial issues. The value of rhetorical analysis similarly becomes evident in contexts where constructing an effective public argument is the difference between survival and serious loss, as in the case of a recent dispute in which a major hydroelectric developer was pitted against a Native population that risked seeing its territory and means of sustenance invaded by dams (Cooren & Taylor, in press). In the rhetorical context, Eisenberg’s (1984) concept of strategic ambiguity in communication and Markham’s (1996) study of the ethics of ambiguity in managerial directives take on particular relevance.

The interpretive approach has similarly revitalized the study of narrative in organizational contexts, in recording both how members create meaning out of ambiguous circumstances (Boje, 1991) and how the organization itself can be thought of as a tissue of narrativity (Cooren, in press; Czarniawska, 1997). As an organizing principle narrative also implicates the study of organizational identity in that every organization will struggle to tell and retell its own story, with some concern for coherence and while addressing multiple audiences. Some researchers believe that narrative is not just about storytelling; it is the basis on which events are structured in the first place—a view that is reminiscent of Burke’s “dramaturgical” view (see, e.g., Robichaud, 1999; Taylor & Van Every, in press).

Critical Theory and Feminist Approaches

What is known as critical theory (in its strict sense referring to the Frankfurt school and in its broader sense referencing approaches that feature power, ideology, and undecidability in their analytic schemes) resembles structuration theory in its preoccupation with the bases of power, but it differs significantly from the latter in the emphasis it lays on the power of discourse to inform organizational worlds of experience. A principal source of inspiration for critical theory is the work of French philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault (1984), who encourages us to take seriously the substantiality of language (hence his term discursive formations, which echoes the idea of geological formations). The constructions of language are not neutral; they have a history of emergence in social practices, and they engender a world of sense in which structures of domination and power are sanitized and naturalized. Take, for example, modern Western conceptions of the individual that stress autonomy, uniqueness, and agency. We should be looking for power not in the persons of a few leaders, or in the monopolization of resources by a privileged few, Foucault argues, but in the ideology that made such distortions of power possible in the first place. Power is thus seen to be diffuse, inherent in the very language we speak. Deetz (1992) elaborates on the relevance of critical theories to the study of organizational communication.

Critical theory addresses themes that crosscut other preoccupations, including fields such as social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988, 1993; Kress & Hodge, 1979) and feminism (Buzanell, 1994; Clair, 1993; Mumbay, 1987, 1988). Feminist scholars have made a great contribution to organizational communication research by demonstrating in their analyses of the unfolding of discourse in interactive situations how privilege and power are exercised and amplified to instantiate gender relations.

Not all the critical work on interaction, however, would normally be classified under this heading. Barker, Tompkins, and Cheney (Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) have shown how concerted control is exercised to discipline individual behavior even in so-called self-organizing groups. A preoccupation with interactive processes, and how they can produce bias, is shared by a large community of scholars who study phenomena such as conflict and negotiation (Putnam, 1989) and how discourse is framed (Clar, 1993; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996). Dialogue has become in fact an important focus of research in communication, just as it has become a popular term for organizational practitioners (Senge, 1990). The latest in the series of Alta conferences has been devoted to this topic.

This critical work has a larger significance in that it has brought to our attention the issue of how to achieve a democratic form of organization. Much of the traditional literature on organization assumed a basis in a kind of machine rationality, but, as Habermas (1984, 1987) points out, there is another rationality that a student of communicative action should bear in mind: the rationality of open and honest exchange and dialogue. It is this preoccupation that has led a number of researchers to explore the organizational dynamics of comparatively nonhierarchical models of organizing, such as cooperatives and collectives (Cheney, 1999; Glaser, 1994; Harrison, 1994). This work similarly brings to the fore international comparisons and has immensely enriched our understanding of what an organization actually is.

RESEARCH EMPHASIS IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION:
CURRENT CONCERNS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

Problematics and Prospects

Mumbay and Stohl (1996) identify four central “problematics” or key issues for the contemporary study of organizational communication that scholars in the discipline must address. First is the issue of voice, or the notion that organizational
communication researchers, rather than sharing managerial concerns and goals such as profit, are more typically concerned with organizations as “social collectivities that pose particularly complex communication issues” (p. 56). Voices exist partially outside of our unit of study and stand to inform important aspects of modern organizational life, as when we consider that certain stakeholders are being represented in administrative or managerial deliberations and decisions.

Another problematic is that of rationality, or the notion that modern organizations are bound to instrumentally (purposive) and technically (predictable) rational goals such as efficiency. However, a tension exists due to coexistent, but often neglected, socially constructed individual goals that might not appear to be plainly instrumentally/technically rational. In this manner, communication phenomena in organizations such as negotiation or interpretation can be understood as incorporating fundamentally important (and rational) information about participants’ definitions of the situation that might transcend narrowly rational views of organizational efficiency. For instance, Feldman and March (1981) made problematic the very notion of information in organizations by showing how the acts of collecting and presenting information themselves serve as important organizational messages.

Third is the problematic of organization. Beyond linear transmission of messages occurring primarily within the container of the organization, organizational communication scholars problematize the very notion of organization and organizing by emphasizing that communication behaviors serve to establish and affirm organizations continually via participants’ interactions. In this view, organizations are constituted in their enactment and exist as individuals strive to make sense of them (Weick, 1979). In this respect, studies of organizational identities and the organizational properties of language (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996) come into view.

Finally, the organization-environment relationship is a problematic because boundaries between organizations and society are increasingly indistinct and permeable. For instance, pressures toward globalization highlight flexible and emergent communication networks (Monge & Contractor, 2000; Monge & Fulk, 1999), and in various ways organizations are increasingly viewed as sites for democratic forms of participation and decision making (Cheney et al., 1998; Stohl, 1995). In each instance, pressures from the external environment are indistinct from those within organizations—as can be seen, for instance, with the application of the concept of the “internal market” to all of an organization’s activities (e.g., Halal, 1996).

These four problematics serve as useful frames for critiquing traditional organizational communication concepts and encourage the development of additional frames for critique. For example, although the socialization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) or assimilation (Jablin, 1987) perspective has resulted in a considerable body of scholarship, and Jablin and Krone (1994) and Bullis (1993) have urged a life-span perspective, most research has focused on newcomers’ organizational experiences (for a notable exception, see Kramer, 1993). Importantly, the work socialization/assimilation stage model has been challenged as privileging organizations’ over individuals’ interests (Cheney, 1987; Smith & Turner, 1995), valuing organizational “real jobs” and devaluing other forms of work (Clair, 1997), and limiting socialization to an organization-centered dynamics and as a predetermined process (Giddens, 1979; McPhee, 1986). In many respects, the research on organizational socialization spans all four of Mumby and Stohl’s (1996) problematics. Furthermore, although this corpus certainly deals with rationality, organization, environment, and (recently) voice, we would additionally frame socialization research as implicitly focused on relationship—another prospective problematic for organizational communication researchers. A further noteworthy feature of this research is that it has involved empirical, interpretive, and critical perspectives (Cheney, in press). Ultimately, we might reflect on how postmodern organizational socialization research would look.

Some New Theoretical Understandings of Communication and Organization

Even from our far-from-encyclopedic survey of some key moments and constructs in organizational communication (i.e., systems theory and interpretivism), it is clear that the field is characterized by exceptionally open boundaries. Although one can lament the resulting lack of a clear disciplinary identity (Mumby & Stohl, 1996), this permeability and the ready receptiveness to ideas, whatever their origin, may well be the mark of a new kind of discipline and a source of genuine vitality rather than simple eclecticism. In a world whose contours are increasingly global, what we have described will almost certainly become the pattern of all 21st-century disciplines concerned with social practice. What are some of the new influences just now being felt by organizational communication researchers? Again it is impossible to enumerate them all, but the following can be identified. We begin with a focus on theory and then turn to some topical areas.

Pursuing Elaboration and Refinement of Structurational Analyses

The concept of structuration is the brainchild of a British sociologist, Anthony Giddens (1976, 1979, 1984). Many of its roots are shared by the interpretivism that we have described above, so it is hardly surprising that it would find a ready reception in communication circles (Browning & Beyer, 1998; Poole & McPhee, 1983; Poole et al., 1996; Riley, 1983; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998). Giddens’s central idea is that both the structures of society and the day-to-day systems of people at work emerge out of the processes of interpretation of those caught up in activity. As they make sense of their own daily experiences by interpreting the flow of events retrospectively, people attribute meanings to what is happening that unconsciously reiterates the patterns of larger institutional forms. Society is continually being reconstituted and, as it is, structures of power are elaborated and confirmed, worlds of meaning are legitimated, and society’s sanctions are enforced.

One of the central concerns of structurational research in organizational communication has been the implementation of technology into organization. Here
again the boundaries between communication and other closely related fields have proven to be fluid. One feature of both communication and noncommunication studies has been the conviction that the properties of technology are not fixed in the developer’s laboratory. Technology is a malleable object whose definition is ultimately determined in the context of its use, where it is given meaning in the same way as other facets of experience, through retrospective interpretation. Some of the work studying the implementation of technology employs basically qualitative methods in a naturalistic field situation (Orlikowski, 1992; Orlikowski & Robey, 1991); some follows a more traditional approach of experimentalism, featuring operationalization of variables and a controlled laboratory situation (Poole & DeSanctis, 1992); some exhibits a mixed strategy (Barley, 1986).

**Exploring the Potentials for Activity Theory and Translation Theory**

Two bodies of theory closely associated with organizational communication but originating in certain disciplines are now beginning to make their influence felt in the field; these are activity theory and translation theory. Activity theory is inspired by a Russian school of learning theory elaborated by Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev, but it is its reinterpretation by the Finnish scholar (and professor of communication at the University of California at San Diego) Engeström (1987, 1990; Engeström & Middleton, 1996) that has demonstrated its relevance to communication research. Activity theory emphasizes very strongly the material grounding of communication in a context of purposive work, within a physical situation, and mediated by technology. One of Engeström’s notable contributions has been to show in his careful analysis of professional dialogue how the worldview of a certain community of discourse is made present in the voices of people belonging to that community as they carry out their tasks. Activity theory aims at uncovering the underlying tensions of overlapping discursive formations that presage and motivate organizational change.

Translation theory emerged out of the sociology of scientific knowledge as a way of explaining how certain views of reality come to dominate and eventually to be taken for granted ("black-boxed," to use the colorful term applied by Latour, 1992). It aims to show how otherwise diverse interests come to be associated with each other to produce networks that take on the single voice of an actor. This work, known in organizational communications studies through the interpretations of Cooren (in press; Cooren & Taylor, 1997, 1999) and Robichaud (1999), thus touches on the essence of organization: its ability to "translate" collectively fragmented human endeavors into a single entity of action. It thus aims to reveal the bases of power as well as to reexamine the ontology of organization.

**Understanding Artificial Intelligence and Its Possibilities**

Recent developments in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) are now making their influence felt in organizational communication studies. The new concept of computing is called variously connectionism, subsymbolic, and parallel distributed processing. It makes the claim that knowledge is not restricted to forms that can be encoded into a symbolic medium such as language to become the basis of cognition (human or artificial). Instead, one of AI's aims is to demonstrate that there is another form of knowledge—subsymbolic knowledge—that is a property of the network of interaction rather than something possessed by any particular node within the network, human or otherwise. This somewhat abstract construction of an alternative form of knowledge has been given a much more recognizable face by Weick and Roberts (1993) and Hutchins (1995), whose careful analysis of teamwork on naval vessels points to the ability of collaborating members to respond successfully to complex environments employing a form of knowledge that they collectively generate, in interaction with technology, that no single one of them can be said to possess, or even be fully aware of. Weick and Roberts refer to the "collective mind"; Hutchins prefers to call the phenomenon "distributed cognition." Taylor and Van Every (in press) show that the assumption of distributed cognition is consistent with the work of some conversation analysts. The implications of this shift of perspective for organizational research remain to be explored, but it is clear that it entails a radical change in how we view organizational rationality and the role of management strategy.

**Seeking the Further Examination of Discursive Fields In and Around Organizations**

Consistent with moves to get beyond the container metaphor for organizational communication, a number of scholars have stretched analyses to include broad patterns in discourse that not only manifest themselves within organizations but also extend beyond the sites of organizations. Research by Deetz (1992) and Mumby (1997) features the patterns of power that are represented within organizational contexts, such as meetings and narratives, but also are parallel to and influenced by broader patterns in the exercise of social power. Clair’s (1997) essay on the colloquialism "Get a real job" is an excellent example of how organizational patterns of power are shaped to some extent by discourses that have a broader cultural life (in the "common sense" of the society). Holmer-Nadesan (1996) shows linkages between certain discourses of human resources management, such as personality testing, and wider cultural knowledge. May (1999) has recently examined the implicit cultural and political assumptions of employee-assistance and wellness programs of many contemporary organizations. Cheney (1998, 1999), McMillan and Cheney (1996), and Cheney and Zorn (1999) have considered how metaphors of the market and the customer/consumer are pervading organizational life today, thus drawing a connection between discourses of marketing and the internal affairs of organizations. Such studies remind us to pay greater attention to the diffusion of knowledge within and between organizations, considering especially how it is that certain ideas come to have the status
of trends to which clusters of organizations, whole industries, or entire sectors appeal.

The discursive turn that has marked communication studies over the past decade is almost certainly due to expand as rhetorical, sociolinguistic, semiotic, critical discourse-analytic, and other language-centered perspectives become more a part of organizational communication’s mainstream research agendas (see the review by Fairhurst & Putnam, 1999). In part, the trend is the result of innovative research by scholars already identified with the field (Mumby & Clair, 1997), but there have also emerged styles of analysis that reflect other disciplinary imperatives. One case in point is the work of Boden (1994), whose analysis is grounded in the tradition of conversation analysis but who has adapted it to the exigencies of organizational inquiry by introducing the notion of a “lamination” of conversations. This allows her to explore features of the flow of information in an organizational context that would otherwise remain unremarked. Another instance of innovation that began outside the field but is very much in the spirit of organizational communication work is the work of Star and Ruhleder (1996), who explore “boundary objects,” or discourse themes among groups where each group holds an object in different significance even though all groups are co-oriented to it. Finally, Czarniawska’s (1997) work on the role of narrative in and around organizations is highly sensitive to the dynamics of both internal and external organizational communication.

Coming to Grips With the Material as Well as the Symbolic Dimensions of Organizational Life

All theoretical perspectives, like all metaphors, have their blind spots or areas that they leave far in the background, largely outside of view (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). If interpretivism and the discursive turn have a major limitation, at least as they have been influential in organizational communication, it is found in their neglect of the biological and physical dimensions of organizational life. Recently, there has been a reaction against these “interpretive excesses” by some scholars, although thus far this movement can be seen largely outside the community of scholars who ally themselves under the rubric of organizational communication. For example, Cloud’s (1994) work in rhetorical criticism is helpful in articulating the material constraints on discourse production, as when she considers the resource limits for persuasive campaigns conducted by today’s labor unions in the face of still-strong antiunion corporate postures. And Aune’s (1997) rhetorical-critical investigations have drawn greater attention to both the material and the symbolic aspects of economic forces. Finally, Ballard and Seibold (1999) have explored both objective and subjective dimensions of time as they relate to our understandings of organizational communication, and sociologist Russell (1996) has enjoined organizational communication scholars to pay closer attention to the nature of work activities themselves—the actual types of work being done—as they examine messages, interactions, networks, and discourses.

Returning to the Sociological Roots of Organizational Analysis While Transforming Its Central Concepts With Insights From Communication Studies

Through most of its history, organizational communication research has offered relatively little insight into broader institutional concerns: issues that transcend the domains of distinct organizations and speak to broad social processes and problems (see Euske & Roberts, 1987). As a number of trends mentioned above reveal, that is beginning to change. Although institution-level concerns have figured more prominently in sociology (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), what can organizational communication researchers say about organizational mimicry (trend setting and trend following) or cross-fertilization (across sectors—as when religious organizations begin to look like businesses and businesses take on characteristics and functions formerly ascribed to religious institutions), or the diffusion of what counts as practical “managerial knowledge”? In this way, organizational communication scholars can return to the societywide concerns that motivated Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and other founders of organizational theory. Furthermore, a distinctly communicative approach to these traditionally sociological preoccupations could help explain the ironies, twists, and turns in the transformation of symbols and organizations that have been missing in accounts of organizations that have often taken social structures for granted.

Seeing Groups as Crucial “Mediating Structures” in Organizational Communication

Organizational groups invite greater attention from communication researchers for theoretical, empirical, and practical reasons (Poole, 1998; Seibold, 1998; Weick, 1979). Theoretically, groups are at the nexus of organizational interaction and structure. Members’ groups have pervasive effects that channel individual agency yet mediate larger organizational structures in processes that constrain and condition individuals. Empirically, and owing to dynamics endemic to task demands and jurisdiction, resource distribution and competition, temporal constraints on performance, multiple levels of operation across groups and organizations (Lammers & Krikorian, 1997), multiparty/multimotive interactions, relational intricacies and power structures, and coordinating/collaborative needs challenge researchers to untangle the empirical complexities of organizational groups. Not only do organizational groups abound (e.g., work groups, cross-functional teams, short-term project groups, ad hoc task forces, perennial agenda committees, and adjudicating groups, executive/administrative teams, quality and oversight groups—not to mention groups as emergent organizations), but group-based organizational structures and activities are becoming increasingly prevalent for philosophical, competitive, and political reasons (Seibold & Shea, 2000). Notwithstanding efforts to apply strong theoretical frameworks to organizational groups (Barker & Cheney, 1994; Poole et al., 1996; Putnam & Stohl, 1996), groups remain much understudied by organizational communication
Emerging and New Topics in Organizational Communication Research

Having considered a number of recent and emerging theoretical developments in organizational communication, we now turn to a brief listing of topics to be explored. Where the topics are familiar, we suggest new avenues of exploration. Where they are new, we simply try to introduce them to organizational communication scholars.

Taking Seriously the Adoption of Diverse Perspectives

Organizational communication is on the brink of a flowering and diversification of scholars’ attention and interests. This flowering of research and organizational behavior, however, only partly reflects traditional, social science journals. The number of articles in these journals has increased significantly, but it is not a complete picture of the diversity of organizational communication scholars. It is important to note that we have not included any articles that have appeared in organizational behavior journals. However, we have included articles that have appeared in journals that are published in both social science and organizational communication journals. Our goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of the current state of organizational communication research.

Technology, Organizations, and Society

The role of technology in organizations is crucial in many issues confronting contemporary organizational communication scholars. As Barney (1986) has convincingly demonstrated, the second-level effects of organizational communication have been found to have strong instrumental and normative consequences. In the coming years, we expect that some of our most fundamental ontologies of organization, communication, and relationships, and organizational communication, will be explored. Where the topics are familiar, we suggest new avenues of exploration. Where they are new, we simply try to introduce them to organizational communication scholars.
ology as a separate area of study). In this regard, compelling work is being produced at the group (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1994, pp. 7-31), organizational (Fulk, 1993), and interorganizational (Monge et al., 1998) levels. Related research treats technology as a patterned discourse that is seen to shape interaction; indeed, from this broad perspective, frameworks for gathering organizational knowledge, like marketing, are heuristically seen as technologies (Christensen, 1999).

As a consequence, although technological innovation has occasionally been the topic of organizational communication studies, there is now an urgent need to focus on the implications of the transformations that accompany the implementation of new technologies. To this end, we can learn from some of the excellent field studies of organizational work that have been conducted over the past decade (e.g., Trujillo, 1992). This work has once again reiterated the remarkable complexity of situated activities and the complex interaction of human and technological agents, but it has also pointed to the strikingly different images of how to organize that characterize, on the one hand, conventional management thinking and, on the other, the perspective of situated action (Suchman, 1987, 1996). Although such conflicts of imagery are at least as old as the famous Hawthorne studies of 1927-1932, they take on a singular relevance in the present era. The result is the emergence in recent organizational communication studies of cutting-edge research into dispersed organizations (Monge et al., 1998), fluid forms of organization that are not so much networks as “knotworks” (Engeström, Engeström, & Vähäaho, 1999; Krikorian, Taylor, & Harms, 1998), and self-organizing forms of association that are in large part enabled through new communication technologies (Contractor, 1994; Corman, 1997). This is work we can expect to see expand very rapidly as the implications of the Internet’s spectacular success are felt (Flanagan, Farinola, & Metzger, in press; Flanagan & Metzger, in press).

Groups and in Organizations

In light of technological, global, and economic forces shaping organizations today, a focus on group-based structures and processes seems imperative (Poole, 1998). Consider global, virtual, or networked organizations characterized by multi-party cooperative work, nonresident work teams, and strong links between activities and individuals across organizational boundaries (Davidow & Malone, 1992; Miles & Snow, 1986; Nohria & Berkley, 1994; Powell, 1990). Based on interactions in network (versus more traditional, vertically integrated) organizations, DeSanctis and Poole (1997), identify potential changes in team-based structures, processes, and social identities. They propose that teamwork may undergo such changes as increasingly heterogeneous team membership, shifts in team-based social identification, and less reliance on formal procedures and more on information-sharing technologies. These changes suggest that core organizational communication issues such as organizational identification, team commitment, communication satisfaction, and communicative competence may become problematic, demanding reinterpretation. In turn, this suggests specific communicational phenomena that researchers might examine in order to understand more fully changes such as those that might occur in (inter)organizational teamwork. For instance, the study of discourse at the team and organizational levels can help us to make sense of diverse, multicultural teams and organizations; researchers can examine symbols in order to assess degrees of commonality or meaningful differences among members of different cultures; and we can explore cross-team interaction networks as a means of examining factors that enhance or inhibit information sharing.

Leadership: Old and New

As suggested by the prevalence of team-based organization and organizational restructuring noted above, new conceptions of leadership are gaining additional significance. Leadership research is now moving beyond even the popular transformational model (Burns, 1978) to consider what it means when leadership is emergent, negotiated, shared, and facilitative in nature. In management studies, Manz and Sims (1984) have written extensively about the dilemmas of the “unleader.” And within communication studies, scholars such as Barker (1993), Fairhurst (2000), Seibold (1995), and Zorn and Thompson (in press) have explored the micro-level communicative aspects of leadership within the team context. From a critical standpoint, of course, it is important to consider the extent to which the reframing of leadership in managerial movements is actually as liberating as it sounds.

Organizing for and Talking About Change

Organizational change and change-oriented persuasion represent important new topics for organizational communication scholars. Lewis and Seibold (1998) delineate the phases of organizational change in explicitly communication-oriented terms: They identify the two broad categories of interaction surrounding implementation (including information sharing, vision and motivation, social support, and evaluation/feedback) and communication-related structures (reward, participation, and role). To some degree, traditional studies of innovation and innovation diffusion (see especially Rogers, 1995, pp. 252-280; but see also Albrecht & Hall, 1981; Bach, 1989) have been supplanted by a focus on change, not because such traditional studies fail to provide continued insight but because of the broad rhetoric of change sweeping organizations today (Zorn, Christensen, & Cheney, 1999). A social critic outside our discipline, Sennett (1998), has called attention to the limitations of our obsession with change in organizations and urges a revaluing of continuity, stability, and loyalty. As with a number of other topics we discuss here, change can thus be conceptualized on several different levels for message analysis—from the distinct change program or organizational innovation to a discourse cohering more or less around a central term or symbol.
We also propose resistance to change as an important area of investigation. Here we refer to both organized (e.g., through labor unions and professional associations) and unorganized attempts to resist or modify, or medially manage, programs of organizational change. However, so far the topic of resistance to organizational programs has received little attention from researchers, see Markham, 1996; Mummy & Nard, 1994). Paradoxically, as employees are reconfigured as internal "customers" and "suppliers." They may make new demands for participation at work (Cherney, 1999).

New Forms of Network Research

Stemming from a diverse set of concerns with social structure (Bateson, 1972; Giddens, 1976; Homans, 1961; Webo, 1971), network perspectives have flourished under equally diverse positional, relational, and cultural traditions (for an in-depth discussion, see Monge & Eisenberg, 1987). Yet the view emphasized in this chapter is the idea that variation among individuals and groups, or organizations and their relational networks, is largely dictated by the characteristics of the type of relation, or society. This view has been criticized as being overly reductionistic and focusing on the emergent nature of social structure. It is argued here that relational perspective on the individual occupies a specific role in understanding the nature of social networks, relational networks, and the relationship between individuals and groups, or organizations. The perspective of the individual as an emergent social system, however, fails to capture the complexity and diversity of social networks (Monge & Contractor, 2000). The perspective of the individual as a social system is a limiting perspective in understanding the social organization within organizations.

Ethos

As regards to the nature of organizations, one of the most important issues is the role of interpersonal relationships. Organizations are essentially social structures, and as such they are characterized by the way in which individuals interact. The nature of these interactions is critical to the functioning of an organization. The ethos of an organization is a set of values, beliefs, and norms that guide the behavior of its members. It is through the ethos that the organization defines itself and distinguishes itself from other organizations. The ethos of an organization influences the way in which it is perceived by others, and it is a key factor in determining the success of an organization.
problem and the very ways that discourses about ethics and ethical practices in organizations are delineated.

The Local and the Global

Social, economic, technological, and political developments are producing organizational alternatives beyond just the traditional sectors of public, private, and so-called independent while also cutting across industries and nations (Poole, 1997). Consequently, organizational communication should continue a trend toward the study of more and different types of organizations that span nationalities, functional domains, and organizational types (Stohl, 1993b). Furthermore, exigencies from outside the organization demand a rethinking of organizational practices with a simultaneous concern for the local and the global. For instance, Stohl (2000) notes how members of global organizations must manage environmental, technological, and social pressures to become more similar to organizational members from cultures other than their own while also maintaining their own distinct cultural identities. Missteps in this complex identity management can result in disastrous organizational outcomes (Seelye & Seelye-James, 1995).

Increasingly, organizational communication scholarship is turning to case studies that implicate a range of processes related to globalization (which is admittedly and importantly a polysemic term). There are studies on international business negotiations, in which the insights of intercultural communication are crucial to the examination of both the microinteractional and macrocontextual features of interorganizational relations. There are studies of multicultural influences within both “home-based” and transplanted multinational corporations, emphasizing multiple levels of understanding of “organizational culture” (Smircich & Calás, 1987). Studies of differences among national and cultural interpretations of key concepts such as “employee participation” have been conducted within the European Union (e.g., Stohl, 1993a). Studies comparing employee relations and organizational rationality in North America and Latin America have appeared, and there have been case studies of global market and related political pressures on long-standing organizational traditions in the public sector of Sweden (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994), of private worker-owned cooperatives in the Basque Provinces of Spain (Cheney, 1999), and of indigenous empowerment movements in Canada (Cooren & Taylor, 2000), Bangladesh (Awul, 1999; Papa, Awul, & Singhal, 1995), and India (Kandath, Papa, & Singhal, 1999; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 1999). The studies in India and Bangladesh bring organizational communication scholarship into direct contact with issues of international development while relating to specific questions of local empowerment, feminism, and values-based organizations.

Societal changes of various types pose great challenges for the study of contemporary organizations, but we think communication researchers are well positioned to address issues such as those mentioned here (see also Munby & Stohl, 1996; Putnam, 1998). We are hopeful that in the coming years the field of organizational communication will offer some of the most intriguing explanations, interpretations, and critiques found in any area of social inquiry.

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