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A Communicative Ontology of Organization? A Description, History, and Critique of CCO Theories for Organization Science

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Writing as an organizational communication scholar, I provide a brief description and history of theories encapsulated by the phrase *communication is constitutive of organizing* (CCO). Then, I explain that CCO theory would benefit from an explicit differentiation between which conditions are prerequisite to and which conditions ensure the constitution of organization. Specifically, I argue that communication may be better thought of as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for organizing.

CCO Theory

CCO theories articulate a communicative ontology of organization. Although the specific mechanisms and processes by which communication is associated with organization are debated hotly among theorists, one premise remains constant across the tradition: Communication calls organization into being.

A Brief History

During the interpretive turn in the 1980s, some organizational communication scholars began to change their focus from "communicating in organizations"

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to a keen interest in the "organizing features *of* [italics added] communication" (Cheney, 2000, p. 25). The scholarly project was first and foremost a philosophical shift. These scholars argued that a force present within communication creates, calls into being, or otherwise produces organization. In the same spirit of this sense, the famed organization theorist, Karl Weick (1969), urged scholars to understand organization as the verb, organizing, in that organization is produced (often communicatively) action by action. Despite what our common language use may represent or reify, organizations are not fixed and stable but are rather called into being by interacting and sensemaking persons who attempt to coordinate their behaviors to accomplish goals. These philosophical suppositions were eventually crystallized by the phrase *communication is constitutive of organizing* by Putnam and Nicotera (2009), whose edited volume is the subject of this forum.

CCO theories trace their history through many roots. Retrospectively, we see that some CCO scholars influenced one another, whereas other CCO theorists worked simultaneously. For instance, Anthony Giddens's (1979) work is an important chapter in the history of CCO theories. Giddens described society as unfolding through time influenced by both structural and agentic dynamics. More to the point, he posited a paradox: Structure (i.e., the determinism of cognitive processes or societal influences) and agency (i.e., the voluntarism of individuals' communicative and interpretive choices) are mutually constitutive of one another. In other words, Giddens explained that society itself is located in a duality of structure in which the enactments of agency become structures that, across time, produce possibilities for agency enactment. Giddens's arguments influenced Boden (1994) greatly (see p. x). Eventually, Boden applied Giddens's insights to the workplace.

Boden (1994) demonstrated how the decision making of organizational members—in this case, university employees—was governed by local logics and turn-taking behaviors. Even more dramatic, Boden articulated how a university literally acted through the rhetorical and sensemaking behaviors of university employees in a budget meeting. In other words, rather than concluding with an explanation of how the organization's structure enabled and constrained communication, Boden argued that the university employees' meeting talk was ontologically what we come to think of as organization. Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) later labeled this strand of organizational research based on Giddens's notion of duality, grounded in action research.

Divergence

In 2000, Taylor and Van Every wrote the groundbreaking book *The Emergent Organization: Communication as its Site and Surface*. Concomitantly, McPhee

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and Zaug (2000) wrote their influential article "The Communicative Constitution of Organizations: A Framework for Explanation." Although both are foundational CCO works, their specific articulations of the central mechanisms and processes by which communication is associated with organization differ. Taylor and Van Every assembled a dizzying number of linguistic, interpretive, and critical theories to argue that communication is the location and manifestation of organization. Functionally, they argued that organization can only be enacted through members' communication and sensemaking; thus, organization is an emergent reality that is constantly in a state of becoming, word by word, message by message, and turn by turn. Their analysis attempted to link microlevel grammatical structures of language and discourse to representations and enactments of coordinated action (i.e., organizing). Within Putnam and Nicotera's (2009) edited volume, chapters by Taylor (2009), and to a lesser extent Cooren and Fairhurst (2009), continue to invoke this perspective.

McPhee and Zaug (2000), writing at the same time, proposed that organization may be thought of as arising from four communication flows: activity coordination, self-structuring, membership negotiation, and institutional positioning. In contrast to Taylor and Van Every's (2000) arguments, McPhee and Zaug's four flow model locates organizing among the microlevel talk of instructions and commands (i.e., activity coordination), the macrolevel talk about how the organization should function and what image it should attempt to create (i.e., self-structuring and institutional positioning, respectively), and the mesolevel talk of culture and socialization (i.e., membership negotiation). Within Putnam and Nicotera's (2009) edited volume, chapters by McPhee and Iverson (2009) and Browning, Greene, Sitkin, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2009) share this perspective.

Ultimately, Taylor and Van Every (2000) may have argued that McPhee and Zaug's (2000, 2009) model of CCO is too broad. In fact, Taylor (2009) wrote in his chapter that he agrees with their model; however, he also "believe[s] that their program of research needs to be supplemented with a more precise theory of communication that has as its objective to trace the genesis and grounding of organizational form and process in the communication event" (pp. 154-155). Conversely, McPhee and Zaug may argue that Taylor and Van Every's model of CCO is too narrow to account for communication's multifaceted relationship to organization.

Necessary and Sufficient?

A tension between these perspectives is apparent throughout Putnam and Nicotera's (2009) edited volume. Nevertheless, the usefulness of both sets of

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CCO theories for organization science may be bolstered by a clear explanation of the necessary and sufficient conditions under which communication constitutes organization. Organizational communication scholars are fond of the argument that communication generates organization because it places the study of communication at the center of organization science. However, that argument—as demonstrated throughout the pages of this forum—reduces the usefulness of CCO theories for organizational studies scholars who hold interests outside of communication. Perhaps, one way to enhance the usefulness of CCO theories for organization science scholars is to clarify and qualify the conditions under which "communication creates organization" (Taylor & Cooren, 1997, p. 425).

Necessary and sufficient conditions are logical qualifiers to nomothetic causality (Wertheimer, 1968). Although CCO theorists seem to avoid employing causal propositions, necessary and sufficient conditions may be a useful analogy for clarifying and qualifying communication's relationship to organization. A necessary condition refers to a circumstance that must be present for an effect to have a chance to be present. A sufficient condition refers to a circumstance whose mere presence ensures the subsequent presence of an effect (Babbie, 2004). CCO theorists tend to blur the distinction between these conditions as they argue forcefully for the importance of communication in the constitution of organizing. Although it should be noted that McPhee and Zaug's (2000) model seems to be a reaction to attempts to define constitutive features of communication too narrowly.

CCO theories patterned after Taylor and Van Every (2000) seem to presume that the presence of specific grammatical structures fulfill both necessary and sufficient conditions to ensure the presence of organizing. Likewise, CCO theories patterned after McPhee and Zaug (2000, 2009) seem to begin from the assumption that activity coordination, self-structuring, institutional positioning, and membership negotiation are the necessary conditions for organizing, whereas their combinations produce the sufficient conditions for organizing (see, e.g., Browing et al.'s, 2009, chapter).

For some scholars, coordinated action produced through communication is a sufficient condition to ensure the presence of organizing. From this perspective, the study of organizing includes the study of "street gangs, virtual groups, social movements and more" (Cheney, 2000, p. 25). However, for others, a comprehensive ontological explanation of organization must be able to distinguish these forms of coordinated action from what we come to call organization prima facie. For example, in the present forum, Sillince critiques McPhee and Zaug's (2009) CCO model on the grounds that the model could include markets, networking, belonging to a community, and social

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movements. For Sillince, an accurate account of the ontology of organization must be able to distinguish the coordinated action of these forms from the coordinated action that identifies modern organizations.

Clarifying and Qualifying

Other problems exist with presuming communication fulfills the sufficient condition for organizing. First, few applications of CCO theories deal explicitly with the possibility communication interferes with action coordination and organizing. Empirical observations and anecdotal experiences indicate that poor workplace talk can lead to inefficiencies, errors, and an inability to interrelate heedfully (Bisel, 2009; Weick, 2001). Thus, it stands to reason that there must be a point at which the presence of ineffective and inefficient interaction produces decay or dissipation of organizing to the extent that the existence of organizing is uncertain. In other words, the mere presence of communication is not enough to ensure the emergence of organizing because communication is ambivalent in the sense that it can facilitate and interfere with action coordination, self-structuring, institutional positioning, and membership negotiation.

Scholars who argue communication fulfills both necessary and sufficient conditions for organizing have difficulty explaining episodes of workplace talk that impede organizing. However, few would deny that some talk is needed to achieve coordinated social action. Thus, claiming that communication fulfills the necessary—but not sufficient—condition for organizing may be more apt because it qualifies and perhaps strengthens CCO theory. In other words, communication is needed for organizing but not enough to ensure organization will be constituted because, at times, communication itself may undermine organizing.

Second, and in addition to overlooking cases in which communication impedes organizing, the CCO project also tends to minimize the importance and influence of material constraint, as Reed argued in his following essay. In fact, communication scholars point out this inherent flaw and attempt to deal with it (e.g., see the chapter by Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). By describing communication as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of organizing, we begin to open rhetorical space for critical assessments of the influence of the material world in organizing by organizational scholars, including organizational communication scholars.

Third, Babbie (2004) described reductionism as a paradigmatic tendency to "explai[n] complex phenomena in terms of a single, narrow concept or set of concepts. Thus, we 'reduce' to a simple explanation what

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in reality is complex" (p. 101). CCO theories may represent conceptual reductionism in that these theories describe the complexity of organization in terms of a single domain. Communication is no doubt necessary for organization; however, the usefulness of CCO theories is enhanced when we qualify and clarify the fact that the mere presence of communication is by no means sufficient for the constitution of organization. Written differently, communication is not the sine qua non of organization; communication is a sine qua non of organization.

Conclusion

One way to move CCO theory forward is to test the boundaries of communication's constitutive force. McPhee and Zaug (2009) argued that "all communication has constitutive force" in that all communication "constitutes socially recognized agency" and calls relationships into being (p. 28). In addition, in their chapter, McPhee and Zaug made the important observation that "although communication relatively straightforwardly constitutes the agency of the communicating parties and aspects of their relationship, the constitution of outside objects, especially complex organizations, is itself more complex" (p. 28).

I agree with McPhee and Zaug (2009) and argue that the gap between communication's constitution of interpersonal relationships and communication's constitution of organizing should be proving ground for CCO theory to clarify and qualify the mechanisms and processes by which communication comes to constitute organizing. This gap may be bridged by organization theory outside of communication theory, or this gap may be bridged by an evaluation of how communication relates to the material necessities of organizing. In sum, CCO theory needs an addendum: Communication is a necessary condition for the constitution of organizing, but it is not sufficient to ensure organizing will be called into being. Future pioneering work in CCO theory will test and articulate the necessary and sufficient conditions under which organization is constituted.

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Bio

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