

CHAPTER 24

Power and Resistance in Organizational Communication

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Power remains a central concern of organizational studies writ large, and elucidating relationships among communication, organizing, and power is a significant element of organizational communication research. The communicative construction of political relationships of influence is key to understanding the organizing process, the everyday experience of organizational life, and institutional policy choices. In the second edition of this *Handbook*, Mumby (2001) provided a detailed history of the intellectual traditions undergirding the study of power and organizations. He also highlighted the significance of understanding resistance as central to organizational politics. Thus this chapter places more emphasis on research developments since that time. Any review of such a large body of literature is necessarily limited and subject to the author's biases, but I attempt to represent a diversity of theoretical, methodological, and topical approaches to the study of power and politics.

The chapter begins by describing some of the predominant theoretical approaches to studying power and resistance in organizational communication. The subsequent section elucidates major theoretical debates in the field, with an emphasis on research that was published over the last decade. The conclusion discusses potential avenues for future research.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Study of Power

Organizational communication employs multiple theoretical perspectives to study questions of power and politics. Though they often overlap, each can be understood as a discourse that emphasizes different elements of the communication-power relationship. Many of the perspectives and methodologies that I address are covered in more depth in other chapters. Here, I briefly describe how interpretive, rhetorical,

critical, postmodern, discursive, feminist, and postcolonial perspectives conceptualize and investigate relationships among communication, organizing, power, and resistance.

First, the interpretive approach focuses on the role of everyday language use and social interaction in socially constructing reality. Methodologically, interpretive research rejects the concept of objectivity in favor of intersubjectivity and reflexivity, focusing on the human being as research instrument. This tradition emphasizes ethnographic and other forms of qualitative research that focus on questions of meaning in social contexts. In organizational communication, interpretive work addresses the relationships among intersubjective meanings, culture, and power (Ellingson, 2005; Harter, Deardorff, Kenniston, Carmack, & Rattine-Flaherty, 2008; Scott & Trethewey, 2008). Generally, this work focuses on the achievement of consensus versus conflict and takes a descriptive rather than prescriptive stance (Deetz, 2001). For instance, Lucas's (2011) study of contradictions between the *working-class promise* and *the American dream* addresses how these two working-class discourses reify class differences and privileges. Although the study bears similarity to Willis's (1977) Marxist ethnography of working-class school dropouts ("the lads"), it focuses more on describing how these cultural discourses contribute to working-class ambivalence about class mobility than it does locating those discourses within structural contradictions of capitalism.

Rhetorical perspectives share commonalities with interpretive and discursive approaches, although scholars in this tradition may hold varied philosophical assumptions. Arguably, rhetorical studies' historical Greek tradition uniquely emphasizes issues of influence and persuasion. According to Conrad (2011), "rhetoric is a complex process through which people develop and refine their beliefs, values, and views of reality by communicating with others" (pp. 2–3), and is therefore closely linked with power and social control. Rhetorical criticism in organizational communication focuses on the "description,

interpretation, analysis, and critique of organized persuasion—and by extension, identification" (Cheney & Lair, 2005, p. 60). By conceptualizing organizations as rhetorical entities, researchers investigate questions of motivation, persuasion, hierarchy, and categorization in the organizing process (Cheney & Lair, 2005; McMillan, 2007). The perspective addresses *internal* political issues (Cloud, 2005; Morgan & Krone, 2001) but also examines the rhetorical representation of organizations as influence agents, advancing understanding of the political role of organizations in society (Aune, 2001; Conrad, 2011).

Critical perspectives encompass multiple theoretical approaches, including critical modernism, postmodernism, feminism, and postcolonial theorizing (Ganesh, 2009a). Major influences in the critical tradition include scholars as varied as Marx, Gramsci, and Frankfurt School theorists including Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas. Mumby (1997) characterized the critical lens as a discourse of suspicion, focused on uncovering structural inequalities. Critical perspectives investigate issues of power, domination, and control, with the goals of understanding, critique, emancipation, and social change. This approach built on the interpretive turn in organizational communication, helping us to understand how certain meanings become dominant in the organizing process and whose interests are served by those meaning constructions (Deetz, 1992a).

Critical studies "see organizations in general as social historical creations accomplished in conditions of struggle and power relations" (Deetz, 2001, p. 25). More specifically, "organizations are conceived as political sites where various organizational actors and groups struggle to 'fix' meaning in ways that will serve their particular interests" (Mumby, 2004, p. 237). Critical research may entail ideology critique, investigating questions of reification and hegemony, or communicative action, drawing from Habermas (1984) to theorize and investigate forms of systematically distorted communication (Deetz, 1992a; Thackaberry, 2004). Generally, critical research critiques domination and

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asymmetry with the goals of reformation toward social justice. Historically, critical perspectives were concerned with obedience, acquiescence to oppression, rewards, and punishments but over time, developed concerns with questions of concertive control, identity, and forms of open communication.

Mumby (1997) contrasted the discourse of suspicion with a postmodern *discourse of vulnerability*, which questions foundational concepts and master narratives such as objective truth, knowledge, and the unitary self. Postmodernism tends to emphasize contradiction and paradox (Ganesh, 2009b). Often associated with the work of Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and others, it is important to note that *postmodernism* is a contested term, and theorists described using this label defy boundaries (Jones, 2009). Deetz's (2001) use of the label *dialogic* helps to avoid confusion regarding the difference between postmodernism as a historical era and various strains of intellectual thought. The term is also more inclusive of anti-essentialist traditions such as American pragmatism (Dewey, 1993; James, 1890) and dialogic theorists such as Bakhtin (Holquist, 1990). Deetz suggested that the perspective foregrounds the constructed nature of language and discourse, the fragmentation of identities, and local and contextualized epistemologies while sharing a critical concern with dissensus and conflict. Although critical and postmodern research intersects and informs one another, theorists in the latter tradition are more likely to treat power as shifting, diffuse, and disciplinary and emphasize the productive role of power, particularly as it relates to questions of identity (Tracy, 2000).

A burgeoning literature investigates organizational power and resistance through a discursive lens. In a 2005 special issue of *Management Communication Quarterly*, Putnam, Grant, Michelson, and Cutcher (2005) delineated discourse as "the practices of talking and writing; the collection of texts that are produced, disseminated, and consumed; and the larger discursive context embodied in these texts" (p. 7), whereas Mumby

(2005) described a discursive frame of analysis as "focusing on the ways that organizational behavior is subject to competing efforts to shape and fix its meaning" (p. 22).

Foucault (1979, 1980a, 1980b) is a significant influence on discourse perspectives on power (as he is on critical and postmodern perspectives). Hardy and Phillips (2004) draw from Foucault to describe *discursive formations* as "bodies of knowledge that 'systematically form the object of which they speak'" (Foucault, 1979, p. 492). Discourse is linked intimately to power in that it "lays down the 'conditions of possibility' that determine what can be said, by whom, and when" (Hardy & Phillips, 2004, p. 30). Critical discourse analysis involves "articulation, disarticulation and rearticulation of elements in a discourse" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 93) as it relates to power and domination. There is some question about the degree to which discourse represents a unique perspective on organizational experience because of the already shared concerns in communication with the social and political construction of knowledge, meaning, and identity. Putnam et al. (2005) suggested that discursive approaches are unique in emphasizing the construction of knowledge as it relates to power and resistance but did not say how specifically.

Feminist research provides another lens for understanding power, foregrounding gender and sexuality as constitutive of organizing and relations of domination, often with attention to the ways that ethnicity, class, nationality, and other points of distinction work together to create inequalities (Allen, 1995; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Buzzanell, 1994; Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Dempsey, 2011). Feminist perspectives tend to share an emancipatory goal of emphasizing communication practice and the creation of spaces for marginalized voices. For instance, Trethewey's (2001) investigation of women's narratives about aging and work suggested that "to at once critique and possibly begin to transform a patriarchal capitalist system that denigrates older working women, we need to first hear from those women and learn from their experience" (p. 185). Feminist

research questions binary distinctions such as subject/object, masculinity/femininity, public/private, and emotionality/rationality, thereby developing a rich critique of taken-for-granted patriarchal assumptions embedded in dominant approaches to organizing (Ashcraft, 2009; Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004).

Finally, postcolonial research represents an emancipatory agenda that investigates marginalization resulting from projects of colonization and decolonization (Guha, 1983; Shome, 2002; Spivak, 1988). Postcolonial theorizing brings our attention to border crossing and the interplay of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and language, and it questions the neocolonial assumptions of European management styles exported to the global south (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007). Subaltern studies focus "on rewriting history from below, based on the argument that dominant narratives of colonial histories have systematically represented the interests of the colonizers and the national elite" (Dutta & Pal, 2010, p. 364). Economic marginalization is bound up intrinsically with exclusion from the public sphere and the production of and definition of what counts as knowledge. Hall (2010) observed in his investigation of Jamaican managers in a multinational bank that

the impact of national culture on organizing in Jamaica calls for a theoretical vocabulary that more explicitly addresses issues of colonial power, history, geopolitical power, and national culture than is generally available in the managerial, organizational, and organizational communication literature. (p. 4)

Theoretical Issues and Debates: Power, Resistance, and Organizing

Having described some of the major approaches to theorizing organizational power and communication, this section discusses developments in organizational research by examining

some significant theoretical debates in the field. These debates include differences in the way we define power, the levels at which we investigate political issues, and the degree to which we should construe power in material and symbolic terms. Scholars also disagree about how we should theorize relationships between power and resistance. Finally, debates emerge regarding avenues for social change.

Defining Power in Organizational Communication

Fundamental to research about organizational politics is the question of how to conceptualize power. Organizational communication scholarship draws from multiple conceptions of power, and debate focuses on how to best emphasize the constitutive role of communication in power relationships. Theorizing has evolved from one-dimensional, pluralist models of power, such as Dahl's (1957) emphasis on a person's or group's direct influence over the behavior of others, to two-dimensional models, such as Bachrach and Baratz's (1962) model that elucidates how elite groups mobilize bias in ways that suppress the open discussion of issues that would threaten their preferences, to Lukes's (1974) three-dimensional model that describes how power operates not only through conflict and decision making but through the absence of conflict and explicit decision points resulting from the ability to shape and articulate the very wants of others.

Structural explanations tend to describe power as a commodity, focusing on intentional and observable acts. For instance, French and Raven (1959) detailed the bases of social power, including reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, and expert power. Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) coalitional model of power viewed organizations as sites of conflict that can be explained by comparing the relative power of different groups in the organization. Indicative of much of this early research, Pfeffer (1981) viewed communication as reproducing and legitimizing already existent

al debates in the field. Differences in the way we think about which we investigate and the degree to which we agree in material and symbolic relationships between power debates emerge regarding the degree.

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relations of power, but not as playing a constitutive role in organizational power. Mumby (2001) observed that organizational research from resource-dependency perspectives often used a transmission model of communication, measuring power in terms of network centrality, access to resources, and control. The research did not interrogate how relations of power were formed or enacted communicatively.

Organizational communication scholars advocated for understanding power as a communicative phenomenon, building on the three-dimensional model of power. The work of Deetz and Mumby integrated critical theories, hermeneutics, and social constructionist epistemologies, highlighting how struggles over meaning (including ideology, hegemony, and distorted communication) are constitutive of organizational life (Deetz, 1992a; Mumby, 1993). Communication-centered approaches also highlighted the construction of subjectivity as a central component of relations of power (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996). The following definitions illustrate this tradition:

- The most effective use of power occurs when those with power are able to get those without power to interpret the world from the former's point of view. Power is exercised through a set of interpretive frames that each worker incorporates as part of his or her organizational identity. (Mumby & Clair, 1997, p. 184)
- "The production and reproduction of, resistance, to, or transformation of relatively fixed (sedimented) structures of communication and meaning that support the interests (symbolic, political, and economic) of some organizational members or groups over others. (Mumby, 2001, p. 587)
- Hardy and Phillips (2004) suggested that individuals and groups exercise power by "articulating meaning in ways that legitimate their particular views as 'natural' and 'inevitable,' link the actions and preferences of other actors to the achievement of

their interests, and make particular socially constructed structures take on a neutral and objective appearance. (p. 304)

These definitions of power provide a useful foundation for communication studies, because they focus attention on the play between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of symbolism and meaning making. Stohl and Cheney (2001) created a more inclusive definition: "Power is associated with influence, the allocation and mobilization of resources, the ability to manipulate situations, the capacity to affect interpretive processes, the fulfillment of needs, the attainment of goals, and the overcoming of resistance" (p. 384), but this definition may separate the role of meaning from the other functions listed.

A significant trend over the last 20 years emphasizes power's dialectical relationship with resistance (Mumby, 2005; Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004). For instance, Mumby (2004) defined power "as a dialectical phenomenon characterized by interdependent processes of struggle, resistance, and control" (pp. 240–241). The dialectical perspective emphasizes mutual struggles over meaning among individuals and groups within shifting relations of power, thus challenging domination views of power (Fleming & Spicer, 2007). Berger's (2005) public relations research, which can be understood as a branch of organizational communication, reflects the dialectical approach by theorizing *power over* in terms of dominance, *power with* in terms of empowering and dialogic relationships, and *power to* as a form of resistance that counters dominance.

Conrad and McIntush (2003) theorized the *punctuated equilibria model*, which arguably reflects a dialectical approach by describing power as a struggle involving outflanking and counter-outflanking between economic/political elites and nonelites (see also Mann, 1986). Significantly, the theory represents a counterpoint to the community-power debates that is more macro level than those discussed earlier. Focused on policy creation, Conrad (2004a)

argued that business elites have knowledge, resources, and connections to maintain policy monopolies, but that

lengthy periods of policy quiescence are broken by intense periods of change when three conditions occur simultaneously: (1) long-standing sociopolitical conditions become visible to the public and are defined as “problems” of sufficient import to demand action by policymakers, (2) potential *solutions* are made available to policymakers, and (3) *political pressures* are sufficiently intense to overcome the dominance by political and economic elites that characterize quiescent periods. (p. 312, emphasis in original)

This approach represents a third option between elite theories that focus on policy domination by powerful groups and pluralist models that emphasize equality of competition among social groups.

The existence of multiple conceptions of power represents an opportunity to understand organizational dynamics in complex ways. Moving forward, though, it is critical that researchers continue to clearly define their assumptions about power and its relationship to communication. At times, scholarship (even postmodern and post-structuralist) continues to draw from French and Raven and resource dependency (Pierce & Dougherty, 2003; Scarduzio, 2011; Tracy, 2005). As organizational communication scholars extend the idea that organizing is a communicative process (Mumby, 1993), we should theorize communication-power relationships as central to that process. For instance, the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) perspective brings attention to micro-level organizing processes, but has been criticized for treating workers and managers as equally capable of discursively constructing the organization (Cloud, 2005) and for a tendency to “delimit the examination of power in communication to issues such as: the competencies

of individual actors; the effects of organizational structure on actors; or the concentration of power in authority figures” (Kwon, Clarke, & Wodak, 2009). Similarly, Kuhn (2008) critiqued governance theories of the firm for treating power as an objective element of organizational hierarchy rather than as linguistically constructed and criticized resource theories for missing tension and conflict.

Investigating Power at Micro and Macro Levels

Researchers responding to calls for contextualized organizational research have brought greater attention to the micro levels of organizational power. Recently, scholars have promoted understanding the links between micro (interpersonal, intraorganizational) levels and macro (interorganizational, cultural, institutional, and policy) levels of interaction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Conrad, 2004b; Kuhn, 2008; LeGreco & Tracy, 2009).

Qualitative research, including organizational ethnographies and interviews, highlights the lived experience of organizational politics, adding greater complexity to theorizing through contextualized methods that address sensemaking and interaction, particularly in everyday interaction (Ashcraft, 2005; Barker, 1993; Bisel, Ford, & Keyton, 2007; Dempsey, 2010; Harter et al., 2008; Larson & Tompkins, 2005; Lynch, 2009; Murphy, 1998). One set of examples comes from research that builds on early critiques of rational models of organizational behavior (Crozier, 1964; March & Simon, 1958; Putnam & Mumby, 1993) by investigating the everyday experience of emotionality and sexuality. Morgan and Krone (2001) described the *emotional social order* in a hospital as a form of social control. Using a rhetorical, dramaturgical perspective, they concluded that “actors work to negotiate the emotional order through improvised performances that directly oppose or otherwise depart from the scripted organizational emotion rules” (p. 318). Similarly, Scarduzio

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(2011) reported that judges express *privileged deviance* because of their ability to alter established emotional norms in the courtroom, with material consequences for defendants. Tracy (2000) shed light on the disciplinary identity work through which emotional norms are constituted on a cruise ship from the perspective of her own experience as an employee. Although much of this research is ethnographic, it is important to note that quantitative research in areas such as dissent also addresses issues of power at the micro level (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002).

Perhaps as a result of this turn toward the everyday, micro level, scholars have called for more attention to the connection between interpersonal/intraorganizational politics and macro-level power issues (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Conrad, 2004b; Kuhn, 2008; LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). Discourse theorists propose that scholars address multiple levels from discourse in interaction to systematic grand Discourses (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). One way to do so is to investigate how macro-level social issues (such as gender and economic ideologies) influence organizations (Norton, 2009). Such work connects intraorganizational politics with broader social structures (Carlone & Larson, 2006; Dempsey, 2007a; Ganesh, 2007). For example, Harter (2004) extended Stohl and Cheney’s (2001) paradoxes of organizational participation by examining how masculine and individualist ideologies in the U.S. cultural context undercut participative solidarity in an agrarian cooperative. Gillespie (2001) investigated how bureaucratic discourses of rationalization and efficiency influenced Medicaid’s adoption of managed care principles, creating disciplinary standards that reinforced discourses of individual responsibility and overlooked the material barriers to compliance for low-income asthma patients.

Another way to connect micro and macro levels is to examine the political role organizations play in society (Norton, 2009). Conrad (2004a) argued that critical research has focused on the micro processes through which managerial power is established communicatively but

has failed to address relationships between managerialism and public policy, evidencing “almost no effort to examine the communicative processes through which managers use the power of the state to further their interests or maintain their dominance” (p. 331). Deetz’s (1992b) early work is an exception that provided a foundation for understanding the growing influence of corporate/managerial logics at the level of everyday politics and public policy. Today, a growing number of researchers are examining the political influence of organizational discourse on social structures (Knight, 2007; Stohl, Stohl, & Townsley, 2007; Weaver, 2010), such as corporate efforts to shape public opinion and public policy. They also consider the possibility of transforming corporations as sites of decision making (Deetz, 2007). For example, Ritz (2007) detailed the discursive construction of corporate personhood through legal decision making and political influence and discussed its implications for democracy. Conrad (2004a) described the issue management strategy of containment used by elites during financial reform debates in the wake of the Enron scandal to delay action until public anger receded. This critical research locates public relations as a macro-level site of contestation, negotiation, and resistance. Motion and Weaver (2005) identified public relations practitioners as central cultural figures who work to establish Foucauldian regimes of truth in a critical study of the Life Sciences Network, which encouraged the public to overlook potential risks to accept genetically modified food. Other research examines the role of public relations in promoting acceptance of corporate self-regulation in areas such as environmental risk (Zoller & Tener, 2010). Such work uncovers potential vulnerabilities and opportunities for public participation in political decision making and resistance to corporate influence. Broadening this focus, Nadesan (2008) employed Foucault’s concept of governmentality to examine the confluence of biopolitical discourses in neo-liberal economics, neo-conservative military/security approaches, and social conservatism.

Conceptualizing Power as Material and Symbolic

Accompanying the development of communicative theories of power has been debate about the degree to which power should be understood in material or symbolic terms. Although much of this debate dichotomizes material and symbolic approaches, from a communication perspective, it is more useful to think about the relative emphasis of symbolism and materialism in any given work. Below, I briefly describe these debates in terms of contemporary social trends.

Cloud (2005) called for greater attention to materiality in organizational communication research. Her study of a union newsletter during the lockout at Staley Manufacturing theorized the "limits of symbolic agency" (p. 511). She argued that the union's rhetorical skill (symbolic power) was not sufficient to overcome management's material advantages (coercive power). This is an important observation; however, this position fails to account for the partly symbolic means through which management attains, defends, and legitimizes their access to coercive resources. Ganesh, Zoller, and Cheney (2005) promoted a complex view of material-symbolic relationships, suggesting that a return to Gramsci's (1971) dual focus on processes of coercion and consent may help us to move beyond a dichotomous approach.

Debates about materiality often center on the degree to which research on identity politics addresses class conflicts and material forms of inequality. Organizational researchers have identified subjectification as a key disciplinary process through which employees take on subject positions consistent with managerial imperatives (e.g., Fleming & Spicer, 2007; Thomas, 2009). A significant line of research views the normative control of the self as a powerful means of managerial hegemony (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Collinson, 1992; Kunda, 1992), with more recent studies theorizing conflict through the active constitution of identity by both managers and employees. Postmodern and post-structuralist

perspectives treat the self as an effect of power and therefore often view resistance as a form of identity work (Carlone & Larson, 2006; Fleming & Sewell, 2002; Knights & McCabe, 2000; Mumby, 2005).

Whereas postmodern scholars see emancipatory potential in the way identity politics can deconstruct dominant relations of power (Ashcraft, 2005; Fleming, 2007), others view the focus on identity struggle as a way to avoid the political commitments central to a critique of capitalism (Contu, 2008). For instance, Cloud (2001) accused cultural studies and organizational communication of having a misplaced faith in the transgressive potential of identity politics and the deconstruction of the self.

These questions of identity and materiality are central to debates regarding power and new forms of management. A significant line of research argues that a shift toward a *new/information/liquid* economy and post-Fordist flexible workplaces signifies the demise of traditional class politics. In this view, the transition from manufacturing to knowledge-based work marks identity politics as a primary nexus of control (Bauman, 2007; Hardt & Negri, 2000; Lash & Urry, 1994). Scholars suggest that manufacturing work, which has become more participative, flexible, and knowledge intensive, is also becoming a less relevant mode of economic production in the face of outsourcing, downsizing, and information technologies. This new system is characterized by immaterial, precarious, and contingent labor (McRobbie, 2010).

Cloud (2001) challenged the argument that a *new* economy makes class analyses irrelevant, countering that manufacturing, class antagonism, and capitalist relationships remain fundamental to the economy. Scholars suggest that the new economic thesis overlooks the materiality of contemporary production, including the worker and environmental impact of technology in the information economy (Cheney & Cloud, 2006; Rodino-Colocino, 2008), observations that are borne out by recent suicides highlighting sweatshop conditions at the Chinese Foxconn plant

that makes iPads analogies (Barboza, 2010). Scholars question whether this should be characterized as a neo-Taylorist control strategy (Cheney & Hodson, 2010). The economic change also has a tendency to view identity politics as a relatively enduring and unstable.

There is a clear tension between organizational theories with a focus on organizing in the face of insecurity, poverty, injury, and environmental issues. These issues are themselves emblematic of identity in complex organizations (Cheney, 2006; Nadesan, 2006; Zoller, 2009b). For instance, we investigated how management assumptions about identity norms encouraged workplace health hazards and how race and class have materialized in life policy implementation (Medved, Jorgenson, Krone, 2002; Wieland, 2002). The status of a growing number of workers (Rodino-Colocino, 2008)

Moving forward, we need to explore how materiality affects multiple forms of digitalization work to address inequalities (McRobbie, 2004). Intersections of class, age, gender, and race is one means of doing so. Fraser (2009) offers a way of connecting identity, materiality, and politics by seeking to reconceptualize identity, recognition, and redistribution, reminding us that materiality is a form of seeking pro-

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that makes iPads and other communication technologies (Barboza, 2010). Additionally, researchers question whether contemporary organizing should be characterized as post-Fordist rather than a neo-Taylorist extension of managerial control strategies (Crowley, Tope, Chamberlain, & Hodson, 2010). These contradictory views of economic change are tied to the philosophical tendency to view power relationships as relatively enduring and stable versus shifting and unstable.

There is a clear need to connect organizational theories with the physical manifestations of organizing in the 21st century such as job insecurity, poverty, occupational illness and injury, and environmental impact, but these issues are themselves linked to discourse and identity in complex ways (Gillespie, 2001; Kuhn, 2006; Nadesan, 2008; Rodino-Colocino, 2011; Zoller, 2009b). For instance, Zoller (2003) investigated how managerial ideologies, class-based assumptions about risk, and masculine identity norms encouraged employee consent to workplace health hazards. Constructions of gender and race have material consequences for work-life policy implementation (Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgenson, & Buzzanell, 2003; Kirby & Krone, 2002; Wieland, 2011) and the precarious status of a growing number of temporary employees (Townesley & Stohl, 2003) and technology workers (Rodino-Colocino, 2011).

Moving forward, research should consider how materiality and symbolism along with multiple forms of difference, inequity, and marginalization work together and with what consequences (McRobbie, 2010; Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004). Intersectionality, which views identity as a crystallization of multiple discourses of race, class, age, gender, and other forms of difference, is one means of doing so (e.g., Dougherty, 2011). Fraser (2009) offers a theoretical path for connecting identity, materiality, and social change by seeking to reconcile the politics of redistribution, recognition, and representation. She reminds us that marketization, resistance in the form of seeking protection from the market, and

emancipation in the form of struggling against protection, may interrelate in unpredictable ways. For example, markets can disrupt other relations of domination in society, and movements of emancipation can sometimes reinforce neo-liberalism. Organizational communication research is well-suited to address these complexities by virtue of its focus on the intersection of the symbolic and the material.

Investigating the Organizational Self by Theorizing Agency and Determinism

Closely related to this discussion of materiality and identity are continued questions about the relationships among communication, power, and agency. To what degree is the self *constructed* versus *real*, and how do we theorize human agency versus determinism?

A significant body of research, often post-modern and post-structuralist, challenges the real-self/fake-self dichotomy invoked when theorists depict power as an external force that restrains or influences the self (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). For instance, Fleming (2005) argued that concepts such as *resistance through distance* (Collinson, 1994) and *psychological distancing* (of front-stage roles and backstage selves) in theories of employee cynicism metaphorically treat the self as stable and given *a priori*. Fleming promoted the alternative metaphor of production that highlights how cynicism enables and constructs identity. Tracy (2000) drew from Foucault to describe how arbitrary and contingent emotional rules on a cruise ship helped to produce what we think of as the self, noting that the relations of power inscribed in those rules are unstable and contingent. Her study of prison guards (Tracy, 2005) also demonstrated how selves are constituted, constrained, and interpreted through discourses of power in multiple and fragmented discourses. Researchers investigate how disciplinary workplace discourses implicate employee *and* management identities,

with the purpose of understanding the production of self, particularly in terms of entrepreneurial and self-governing subjects under "new" forms of concertive control (Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Kondo, 1990; Kunda, 1992).

Theorizing agency remains a central point of debate. For instance, Mumby (2004) argued that the ideology critique tradition (Althusser, 1971; Burawoy, 1979) lacked a theory of agency because it construed power as pervasive and relatively immune from resistance. Neo-Marxist perspectives investigating corporate colonization, manufacturing consent, and designing selves have been criticized for depicting managers as powerful agents versus relatively powerless and reactive workers (Mumby, 2005). Today, writers frequently critique postmodernism, and Foucault in particular, for failing to adequately theorize agency. For example, Conrad (2004b) argued that the idea of organizations as constituted through discourse can be taken too far, to the point that "there is no agency and there are no oppressors" (p. 429).

Multiple authors have proposed ways of theorizing agency from the perspective of a socially constructed self, often by focusing on the multiplicity of power discourses. For instance, Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) described *agency* as follows:

Our own reading of Foucault locates agency in the act of choosing among multiple Discourses, while recognizing that one is never outside of Discourse; we simply move from one discursive network to another (Calás & Smircich, 1999). Nevertheless, resistance to a Discourse is achievable, suggesting possibilities for simultaneous control and change where behavior can be reproductive at one level and resistant at another because of the space of action that multiple Discourses make available (Daudi, 1986). (p. 1336)

Postmodernists continue to emphasize that agency itself does not stand outside relations of power. Mumby (2005) suggested that discursive perspectives avoid the power and resistance

dichotomy so that "social actors are neither romanticized nor viewed as unwitting dupes but rather are seen as engaging in a locally produced, discursive process of self-formation that is always ongoing, always tension filled" (p. 38). Critical and feminist research also encourages theorists to avoid dichotomizing between passive and active, victim and agent (Trethewey, 2001). Hall (2010) treated the question of agency as an empirical one by investigating the degree to which Jamaican managers mimicked Western discourses or recognized themselves as agents able to resist dominant Western discourses (see also Kuhn, 2006). This empirical approach regarding the performance of agency and its implications is a promising path for organizational communication researchers.

Investigating the Pervasiveness and Productivity of Power

As the preceding discussion suggests, theorists disagree about the pervasiveness of power and the degree to which it enables or constrains. Studies of resistance are central to our understanding of power, dominance, the self, and social change. Although few authors explicitly define the term, *resistance* is generally associated with contesting, nonconforming, or negotiating dominant relationships of power.

A number of researchers continue to indict organization studies for understanding power in terms of domination (Larson & Tompkins, 2005). For example, Pierce and Dougherty (2003) argued that a domination view of power prevails in functionalist, materialist, and postmodern scholarship. Yet Foucault-inspired interest in power as both productive and repressive, and the growing characterization of resistance as a form of communicative struggle, contradicts these claims.

Certainly, researchers continue to explore the ways in which communication promotes hegemonic relationships and forms of discursive closure. For instance, Thackaberry's (2004)

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investigation of a U.S. Fire Service self-study showed how potential discursive openings for transforming outdated assumptions about fire safety practices fell victim to discursive closure as technical and bureaucratic solutions superseded cultural changes (see also Lyon & Mirivel, 2011). However, much of this research also emphasizes potential openings for change and therefore rarely depicts power as totalizing. Ainsworth, Hardy, and Harley (2005) investigated how a World Bank development program attempted to co-opt and control development debates but also how an independent initiative by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots groups resisted the World Bank's approach and created opportunities for participation in the program.

The emphasis on communicative struggles of power and resistance has undermined totalizing views of power. It is therefore surprising that a number of contemporary studies continue to offer as a major finding the observation that power is not totalizing. Such work often contrasts this finding with functionalist studies from the 1970s and 1980s or early research concerned with the development of concertive and cultural control in workplaces rather than engaging with more contemporary research.

The continued indictment that organization studies employ totalizing and dominating views of power ignores the rise of dialectical and complex views of organizational power. Inherent in many of the definitions of power at the start of the chapter was a focus on how power can be simultaneously constraining and enabling, productive and repressive. For instance, Scott and Trethewey's (2008) ethnography of a fire department suggested that "the relations among discourse, identity, and ontological security are significant because of their capacity to shape interpretive repertoires with the practical, secondary effect of enabling and constraining particular risk management strategies" (p. 301). Knight and Greenberg (2002) described how Nike's promotionalism, while often deflecting public political concerns about factory conditions in their supply chain

(which can therefore be understood as a form of domination), also made it a target for subpolitics from social activists focused on counterbranding through the use of reflexivity.

Mumby (2005) proposed the dialectical view of power to overcome dichotomies associated with privileging either control or resistance rather than understanding their interrelations. He suggested that those who privilege control tend to see resistance as ineffectual (reproductive of power relationships), while those who privilege resistance may romanticize the concept. By contrast, "a dialectical approach examines the inherent tensions and contradictions between agency and structure, between the interpretive possibilities that exist in every discourse situation and institutional efforts to impose or fix meaning" (Mumby & Ashcraft, 2004, p. 53). Ashcraft (2005) described dialectics from a discourse perspective, indicating that "such conceptual developments imply that everyone who participates in discursive activity engages in control and resistance, sometimes simultaneously, and that participants derive their differential capacities to do so from their fluctuating positions vis-à-vis multiple discourses" (p. 72).

Dialectical perspectives emphasize the simultaneity of control and resistance, domination and subordination. For instance, Lynch (2009) conceptualized humor in dialectical terms. He observed that humor can reinforce existing power relations when those in authority use it to mask or normalize their power and when employees use humor to let off steam in ways that reinforce the status quo. But workers also use humor to attenuate managerial encroachment on their work and to enforce health and safety standards. Similarly, Fleming (2007) theorized sexuality as both an object of control and site of resistance and empowerment in a high-commitment culture, and Carlone and Larson (2006) investigated self-help groups as sites of control and resistance in identity formation in a knowledge-intensive firm.

Dialectical theorists highlight linkages between domination and subordination by

accounting for shifting relations of power. Larson and Tompkins (2005) revisited unobtrusive control through a dialectical lens that treats managerial identity and employee relations as more tenuous and vulnerable than previous studies, recognizing that individuals may move from subordinate to dominant status over time or may simultaneously occupy different positions of control. Real and Putnam (2005) observed that, although unions are often positioned as fighting for the marginalized, they also are systems of power and hierarchy in themselves. This observation underlines the need to specify the contextualized relations of power that researchers choose to foreground. For instance, Ashcraft (2005) employed the concept of *resistance through consent* to describe airline pilots who consented to a new team-based leadership program that threatened their status and authority. The pilots accommodated the program into their existing professional framework by viewing it instrumentally as a mechanism to achieve better control among the crew or as legitimating their roles as fathers who encourage sons to take some control. She argued that pilots resisted a loss of control through this re-description. Reconceptualizing this process as "resistance and consent" may more clearly situate pilots (similar to managers) as both employees and supervisors who seek to maintain authority over subordinates while complying with demands from superiors.

Norton (2009) promoted a diachronic view of resistance as he described how relations of power and what counts as transformation changed during the course of an extended controversy over land-use decision making. In a somewhat similar vein, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) argued that existing bullying research dichotomizes the powerful and powerless in defining bullying, whereas a dialectic view of power reveals how resistance and abuse can escalate as employees cycle through individual and collective, overt and covert forms of resistance.

Mumby (2005) critiqued taxonomies of resistant behaviors for reifying the concept and

overlooking context, multiple potential meanings, and various intended and unintended outcomes. The dialectical perspective highlights the partiality and often-unanticipated consequences of resistance. For instance, bullied employees may exit the organization as sign of defiance, but the departure may be the outcome desired by the bully (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Real and Putnam (2005) found that when a group of airline pilots chose to critique union leaders instead of the company, the resulting policy created unintended consequences as Eagle and AA pilots became somewhat interchangeable. Gill and Ganesh (2007) conceptualized *bounded empowerment* among female entrepreneurs, finding that although participants framed entrepreneurialism as a form of empowerment, empowerment was marked by tension and contradiction, as it resulted from negotiating constraints such as individuality and current capitalist conditions. Dempsey (2007a) complicated the relationship between accountability and empowered practice in a study of an international environmental justice NGO. NGOs face competing pressures for accountability from potential funders as well as clients, yet increasing calls for NGO accountability to stakeholders may reify those groups or impede local autonomy. She argued that reducing voice can sometimes have empowering effects in terms of protecting vulnerable members, making more room for marginalized voices, and addressing local participants' limited time and energy.

Moving forward, researchers should clarify what is being resisted (for instance, preventing a loss of control may entail very different communication processes than seeking to gain control). We need to carefully stipulate and support our description of the often-layered relations of power in question and how they may change over time and across contexts, thus influencing how we decide what to conceptualize as *resistance*.

Additionally, returning to the question of agency, we should avoid associating agency and resistance with *any* behavior that either does

not conform to what we call "resistance" or that it is not a form of choice making. For instance, the activity in a bureaucratic organization, as described by Burnett Meidlinger, is not a form of resistance, particularly when it involves choices that these choices reflect the exercise of power, let alone an exercise of power. Larson and Tompkins (2005) appears to be resistant to the idea of sensitivity to managerial decisions. I noted that although resistance and cynicism are treated as directives, cynicism is a form of consent which consent is achieved through a process, because it emerges from a view of themselves as a form of resistance. Fleming and Spicer's (2007) work at the level of behavioral change in organizations of resistance. For instance, I examined career advancement in temporary work with managerial experience. Jordan interprets temporary workers to be a form of resistance to their identity. This is a significant power is ways in which managerial compliance workers will give up working environment benefits.

Seeking Social Control Resistance as Overt and Individual-Control

Even within the dialectical view of power, researchers still tend to differ in how they investigate forms of resistance, such as overt (public and visible) and indirect (private and invisible) (Fleming et al., 2005). Although resistance can be understood as binary,

not conform to what are presumed dominant discourses or that indicates the slightest level of choice making. For instance, showing creativity in a bureaucratic structure (Coopman & Burnett Meidlinger, 2000) is not necessarily resistance, particularly when it is not apparent that these choices reflect awareness of relations of power, let alone an attempt to alter them. As Larson and Tompkins (2005) observed, what appears to be resistance may reflect employee sensitivity to managerial ambivalence about preferred decisions. Fleming and Spicer (2003) noted that although reactions such as employee cynicism are treated as resistance to cultural directives, cynicism can be the vehicle through which consent is achieved at the level of *behavior*, because it encourages employees to view themselves as liberal, choosing subjects. Fleming and Spicer's observation about consent at the level of behavior challenges some conceptions of resistance. For example, Jordan (2003) examined career advice authors who encouraged temporary workers to perform compliance with managerial expectations for professional work. Jordan interprets this *performed compliance* as a form of resistance, because it prompts temporary workers to view work as less central to their identity. This interpretation ignores significant power issues by overlooking the ways in which management gains behaviorally compliant workers without providing supportive working environments, job security, or long-term benefits.

Seeking Social Change: Resistance as Overt-Covert and Individual-Collective

Even within the dialectical perspective, scholars still tend to differ in the degree to which they investigate forms of resistance that are relatively overt (public and visible) or covert (hidden and indirect), and individual or collective (Putnam et al., 2005). Although these choices should not be understood as binaries, significant theoretical

debates about these issues have implications for our understanding of power and social change.

Over the last 20 years, scholars have investigated everyday forms of resistance that are relatively covert, in part as a reaction to the perception that early organizational research dismissed small acts of resistance as incapable of disrupting capitalism (Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007). Scott's (1990) *hidden transcripts* have been examined as employee nonconformist discourse—such as humor and bitching—that occurs outside the purview of management (Murphy, 1998; Tracy, 2000). In addition, employee irony and cynicism are investigated as relatively private ways to resist managerial influence (Fleming & Spicer, 2003), along with ambivalence (Gabriel, 1999), foot-dragging, disengagement (Prasad & Prasad, 2000), sabotage, theft, and noncooperation (Morrill, Zald, & Rao, 2003). The focus on “below the radar” or “guerilla” resistance calls attention to forms of communication that make visible hidden forms of conflict and establish some measure of agency and autonomy by withdrawing compliance from what are often unobtrusive forms of control aimed at worker subjectivity (Fleming, 2005; Trethewey, 1997).

Of course, there are no hard and fast distinctions between covert and overt forms of resistance. Given that what counts as resistance is context based, subtle attempts to defy dominant meanings through humorous plays on managerial slogans or the expression of cynicism may be performed for powerful organizational members, as resisters rely on ambiguity to avoid sanction (Mumby, 2009). Nonetheless, recent scholarship has called into question whether the focus on subtle, everyday forms of resistance in the workplace is building adequate understanding of the broad range of communicative processes by which relatively hidden forms of resistance link to more self-consciously confrontational efforts to challenge power relationships in a variety of settings. Central to these debates are different assumptions about communication and social change.

Scholars who emphasize the theoretical goals of emancipation (often critical modernist or

affirmative postmodern in orientation) argue that much extant resistance research has little to say about the potential for material and social changes in relations of power in achieving social justice (Contu, 2008; Ganesh et al., 2005). Contu (2008) critiqued researchers for sidestepping Marxist concerns with anticapitalist relationships, juxtaposing *decaf resistance* concerned with cynicism and misbehavior with *real resistance*, defined as an effort that may involve existential risks and material losses in its aim for transformation. Researchers with a constructionist rather than realist ontology (Ganesh et al., 2005; Mumby, 2005) also observe that studies of covert and everyday resistance may capitulate to managerialist and capitalist interests.

Questions of change and the degree of risk involved in communicating resistance are important ways to distinguish among different, contextualized forms of power struggle. Many researchers investigate the significance of covert forms of resistance in reclaiming and articulating conflicting interests but also recognize their limits in achieving change. For instance, Wieland (2011) characterized a Swedish system for managing work-life balance as resistant not because it successfully altered work expectations but because the system kept conflict apparent. Tracy (2000) observed that hidden transcripts of bitching gave employees the impression of control but largely left disciplinary expectations in place, including those that may lead to harassment and burnout. Significantly, Lynch (2009) distinguished between humor's role as a safety valve that allowed employees to express dissatisfaction while leaving systems of power and control in place and its role in protecting workers' preferred identities and resisting external control of the labor process: "Humor's power as a form of resistance lies in this unsanctionable quality that workers can safely use resistance humor to express grievance, resist, and challenge unfair and/or burdensome managerial constraints to effectively change organizational practices" (p. 459). Lynch thus draws attention to the relative safety of humor versus riskier approaches to seeking change.

Additionally, Ganesh et al. (2005) argued that studies of resistance in organizational communication have largely been theorized as the individual ability to see through dominant ideological systems (such as cynical reactions), in part because Foucauldian theories can lead us to view forms of group action as disciplinary. This tendency resulted in overlooking the development of more collective forms of resistance and new forms of organizing represented by such efforts. Ganesh et al. (2005) called for work that explicitly theorizes or documents pathways between relatively individual and more coordinated forms of collective resistance. Research that explores these connections includes Gossett and Kilker's (2006) analysis of the website "radioshacksucks." Although the website facilitates anonymous complaint outside the workplace, the hidden transcripts of this site fomented overt and collective resistance by airing complaints that were visible to management and encouraging members to participate in an ongoing lawsuit against the company. Zoller and Fairhurst (2007) theorized how discursive leadership can connect hidden transcripts of resistance with the development of social movements and other collective forms of resistance.

Ganesh et al. (2005) called for renewed attention to forms of resistance that entail conscious efforts at transforming dominant meaning systems and power relationships: "We see transformation as a term that highlights attempts to effect large-scale, collective changes in the domains of state policy, corporate practice, social structure, cultural norms, and daily lived experience" (p. 177; see also Trethewey, 1997). They encouraged attention to protest and activism as forms of transformative resistance and a return to Gramsci's (1971) counter-hegemony as a collective practice. At the same time, they noted that understanding what counts as transformative in terms of goals or outcomes must be understood contextually and over time.

Activism and social movements represent one avenue of organizing social change (Clemens & Minkoff, 2004). Cloud's (2005) study of Staley's

union strike encouraged confrontational economic course of victim movement and struggles among formal social movements, campaigns, and (Kendall, Gill, & (2007; Rodino-Coller, Zoller, 2009a). Fairhurst (2009) investigated collective as a force of neo-liberal forms seized on post-Katrina austerity and privatized forms of relations, including Neill & Stohl, 2010) an model (Dutta & between the demonstration and "leaderless" participation of participant communication. Researchers bring use of communication assumptions about responding tactics in groups in the comment (Bendell, 2007). Additional research development of new decision-making participation activism (Rao, Moore, 2007) creative efforts to frames for activist dialectical perspective the ways in which themselves become or discipline. For research into transparency cautions us to address inequalities that develop and among such with which they work (Papa, 2006).

Researchers also participative, and den

union strike encourages attention to the need for confrontational economic strategies versus a discourse of victimhood and moralizing. Social movement and activism research sheds light on struggles among grassroots organizing, more formal social movement organizations, union campaigns, and corporate issue management (Kendall, Gill, & Cheney, 2007; Knight & Wells, 2007; Rodino-Colocino, 2012; Weaver, 2010; Zoller, 2009a). For instance, Kim and Dutta (2009) investigated the Common Ground Collective as a force of solidarity and struggle against neo-liberal forms of crisis management that seized on post-Katrina New Orleans as a site for austerity and privatization. Research into networked forms of resistance to neo-liberal institutions, including New Zealand activists (Ganesh & Stohl, 2010) and the transnational Zapatista model (Dutta & Pal, 2010), highlight tensions between the democratic potential of open access and “leaderless” participation and the challenges of participant commitment and decision making. Researchers bring attention to activists’ strategic use of communication to challenge dominant assumptions about corporations and the corresponding tactics used to promote change among groups in the corporate accountability movement (Bendell, 2004; Bendell & Bendell, 2007). Additional research can lend insight into the development of new organizational forms and decision-making processes that emerge through activism (Rao, Morrill, & Zald, 2000), as well as creative efforts to avoid traditional win-lose frames for activist goals. At the same time, the dialectical perspective reminds us to attend to the ways in which such efforts to fix meaning themselves become nascent forms of hegemony or discipline. For example, Dempsey’s (2007b) research into transnational advocacy networks cautions us to address potential tensions and inequalities that develop within advocacy groups and among such groups and the communities with which they work (see also Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006).

Researchers also investigate alternative, participative, and democratic organizing models as

methods of social change (Cheney, 1998; Harter, 2004; Koschmann & Laster, 2011; Medved et al., 2001; Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Employee cooperatives, local exchange trading systems (wherein local communities develop democratic alternatives to dominant forms of currency), and local farming efforts (Dougherty, 2011; LeGreco & Leonard, 2011) represent a potential material and discursive challenge to corporate hegemony.

Scholarship that questions dominant, taken-for-granted cultural meanings (though not necessarily explicitly deconstructionist) represents another avenue for social change by highlighting the potential for cultural change in areas such as employment and career discourse (Roper, Ganesh, & Inkson, 2010; Trethewey, 2001), market fundamentalism (McMillan & Cheney, 1996), and managerial control (Deetz, 1992a). Deetz (2007) promotes the institutionalization of deep democracy through programs such as stakeholder participation models that educate the public about collaborative methods of decision making and governance. One goal is to overcome liberal models of decision making and information-oriented conceptions of communication in order to allow emergent solutions to develop from the ground up rather than constitute groups that merely reinforce existing positions. More research is needed to help us understand how such efforts scale up to create significant cultural changes and evaluate the potential of alternative and democratic organizing to confront dominant discourses and the material and social inequalities they support.

The tensions among the different research trajectories—subjectivity, culture, and social movements as sources of change—are productive to the degree that they pursue the interconnections of individual and collective efforts, the need to resist the reproduction of existing relations of power, and articulate potential alternatives to the status quo. We should encourage scholars to develop more communication theories *for* social change as well as theories *about* social change. These efforts may entail designing participation methods and partnering with organizations and

social movements in ways that challenge traditional understandings of scholarship. Participatory action research represents a significant model for this kind of work (Harter, Hamel-Lambert, & Millesen, 2011; Parker, Ocegüera, & Sanchez, 2011), although we must take seriously the implications of managing multiple forms of privilege and inequality in the process (Dempsey, 2010).

Conclusion

Reflecting the edition as a whole, this chapter demonstrates the theoretical and topical diversity of organizational communication research. A key challenge is to maintain dialogue across perspectives so that we continue to build organizational communication theory and praxis rather than retreat to intellectual silos. A potential weakness of this chapter's focus on theoretical debates is the risk of reinforcing differences as binaries. My hope is that discussion of these debates helps us to focus on useful tensions and highlight ways to move beyond tensions that impede developments in theory and practice. This conclusion considers directions for future research.

Since the publication of the last *Handbook* in 2001, scholars have responded to calls for more communication-centered research. Scholarship has highlighted the mutually constitutive role of communication, power, and organizing, signaling the centrality of power and politics to organizational communication research as a whole. We should continue to develop communication-based explanations of power, treating communication as constitutive of power rather than merely an effect or expression of power. We also need to ensure that critical developments regarding power in organizational life and the politics of scholarly representation inform incipient research areas such as new media, CCO, and positive organizing. The concept of *positive* organizing (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003), for instance, would benefit from thinking about how framing research as positive eschews a dialectical

approach to understanding how power is both enabling and constraining. Positive research should also engage with questions of power and reflexivity by asking what counts as positive organizational experiences and outcomes and for whom.

Research also has responded to calls for ethnographic and meaning-centered research that uncovers the everyday lived experience of organization members. This body of research has contributed to more nuanced theorizing and more recognition of tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes in organizational life. This micro-level focus has engendered new calls for connecting micro-level with meso-level and macro-level research. As we consider these connections, we should also encourage multimethod approaches involving varied forms of qualitative research (such as ethnography, interviewing, case comparisons, histories, textual analysis) and quantitative research (surveys, experiments, network modeling) to expand our theoretical reach.

Since the publication of the last *Handbook*, research has given increased attention to organizing and globalization (and related questions of localization), including transnational business, economic institutions, NGOs, and activist networks. Organizational communication scholars have begun to account for how the Western setting of so much of our research influences our theories of power and resistance. More work remains to be done to address the connections among the symbolic and material aspects of globalization and organizational politics, including neocolonial relationships and the dynamic interplay of cultural and ethnic hegemony and resistance, new patterns of outsourcing work and their relation to constructions of gender and ethnicity, and changing configurations of power relations among nation-states, transnational corporations, and transnational NGOs.

At one time, scholars accused organizational communication of being largely atheoretical and practitioner focused. This edition is evidence of the theoretical and conceptual development of communication-centered explanations of

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organizational experience. There is some danger that organizational communication theories redescribe the same phenomenon in new terms based on emerging theoretical fads (systems, cultures, discourses). This observation does not discount the need to develop new vocabulary—from a pragmatist approach, theory development as description and redescription is significant in developing new ways of thinking (Rorty, 1989). However, in order to maintain relevance, we need to articulate clearly the implications of different descriptions for the practice of organizational communication. For example, we should consider how insights regarding power as both enabling and constraining and its intertwined relationship with resistance can be garnered to not only explain organizational life and critique existing practices but also develop potential models for challenging dominant relations of power and articulating transformative organizational practices.

As we build explanatory theories that address ontological and epistemological debates (e.g., What is human agency? What is the nature of power and organization?), we should articulate how these insights inform praxis in multiple contexts. Fortunately, organizational communication researchers have challenged managerial biases that evaluated communication almost entirely in terms of effective outcomes as defined by organizational leaders, providing space for us to think about how theories of organizational power and politics can speak directly to major contemporary political challenges. For example, how can organizational communication inform efforts to contest dominant constructions of the economy to promote ecologically sustainable and democratically equitable organizing in the face of climate change, peak oil, and population demands? Can unions reassert their role as advocates for the working class through cooperative and innovative strategies, and what other models exist for organizing working class and impoverished people? How do organizational communication theories translate into recommendations for meaningful change in racist

and/or patriarchal work experiences in practice? How can the public participate in policy and electoral politics in the face of corporate influence (such as the Citizens United vs. U.S. Supreme Court decision and global trade pacts)? How do we recommend that northern-based NGOs and activists partner with communities in the global south in ways that avoid reproducing relations of dominance and dependence as they work to achieve social justice goals? In many ways, our research responds to these issues, but the challenge remains to move from the journal/book page to public engagement and back again (see Keashly & Neuman, 2009; Rodino-Colocino, 2012).

Much debate is likely to occur regarding what constitutes relevance and utility in engaged research. As this chapter demonstrates, debates will be compounded by conflicting views about the degree and nature of social change that is possible as well as what constitutes an improvement in organizational life, a model of social justice, or a method of empowered organizing. There are no universalistic articulations of values from which to base claims or a suspension of power relations toward which to aim. These conversations, though, are central to improving the social relevance of organizational communication theory when they inform and are informed by various models of practice and build dialogue across communication research perspectives.

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