4.4: Representative Modern Theories

Learning Objectives

• Understand the basic precepts of systems theory and Karl Weick’s theory of organizing and sensemaking.
• Understand the basic precepts of Giddens’s structuration theory and its applications made by Poole and McPhee to organizations.
• Understand how, according to feminist theory, organizations are gendered and a primary site for configuration of gender roles.

To this point, we have explored approaches to theorizing organizational communication rather than specific theories. Yet we believe that focusing first on approaches is important. To speak of “interpretive organizational theory,” or “critical organization theory,” or “postmodern organization theory” is not to speak of any one single theory. Rather, each is—along with the postpositive perspective—a general approach to the looking at the problem of organizational communication. Each approach is informed by its own ontology (belief about the how things exist), epistemology (belief about how things can be known), and axiology (belief about what is worth knowing). Then, out of their respective philosophical commitments of each approach emerge specific theories. In the remainder of this section we will describe important modern theories of organizational communication that have emerged from the different approaches. And by first grasping the underlying approaches and how each looks at the problem in a different way, we believe you will be better equipped to understand specific theories and “where they’re coming from.”

Before proceeding, though, we offer one last thought to help put matters into perspective. You have likely heard the popular catchphrase “paradigm shift.” It was coined half a century ago by Thomas Kuhn.

Kuhn, T. (1962). The structure of scientific revolutions. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. A historian and philosopher of science, he noted that theories which scientists generally agreed were settled could suddenly be overturned. These “scientific revolutions” were not always due to a new discovery, but to a new way of looking at the problem. The old paradigm closed off alternative approaches but, over time, some scientists became dissatisfied until momentum built for a paradigm shift. Kuhn’s thesis
has also been applied to the social sciences—and the domain of organizational studies provides an excellent case in point. What is now called the postpositive approach dominated the field into the 1970s, until some organizational communication researchers became interested in the concept of organizational culture and felt constrained by the postpositive paradigm. New ways of looking at the problem were needed.

A generation or two later, organizational communication research has spawned four paradigms that are widely recognized by scholars. None can lay claim to being "the" dominant paradigm. Neither is the postpositive approach obsolete; if anything, it informs more research projects and more researchers than the other approaches, and retains wide influence. This is especially so since postpositive research aims at prediction, which is valued by the corporate world as a key to improved management practices. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that organizational communication research has split into four communities, each with its own paradigm. If so, we believe this is unfortunate. The specific theories described in this section illustrate the innovative work being done, on important problems of contemporary organizational life, through different approaches to organizational communication—and through blending aspects of those approaches. This should persuade us that each approach has something to contribute. Having multiple paradigms in play, as we do today, presents the field with a unique opportunity.

Postpositive Approach: Systems Theory

Systems theory, a theory based on the metaphor of the organization as a biological organism, so that the organization is seen as an open system that interacts with its environment in order to acquire the resources it needs to survive and grow, offers a good illustration of how organizational communication research from a postpositive perspective has continued to develop and even incorporate insights from other approaches. The story of systems theory begins in the mid 1950s when, as we saw in Chapter 3 "Classical Theories of Organizational Communication", the heyday of classical management theory had passed and the human resources approach was ascendant. In 1956 the Canadian biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy first published his “general system theory” which proposed that traits found in biological systems could be applied to any system. Von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). General system theory: Foundations, development, applications. New York: Braziller. A decade later, the notion of applying the theory to organizations was popularized in an influential book by Daniel Katz and Robert Kahn. Katz, D., & Kahn, R. L. (1966). The social psychology of organizations. New York: Wiley. The old metaphor of the organization as a machine was replaced by the metaphor of a biological organism. As a result, the conception of the organization as a closed system was replaced by that of an open system, which is open to its surrounding environment, as opposed to a closed system that is not. A closed system is only concerned with input and output, whereas an open system encompasses input, throughput, and output. Where a machine operates on its own, a biological organism can only survive by interacting with and gathering inputs from its surrounding environment. Thus, compared to the input-output of a machine, the operations of a biological organism involve input-throughput-output (a concept we encountered in Chapter 1 "Introduction to Organizational Communication"; see Figure 1.1).

Through systems theory, other principles from biology have been applied to organizations. Like an organism, an organization is not an undifferentiated hodgepodge of parts but a system with a hierarchical ordering. The notion is system theory which states that an organization is not a mass of undifferentiated parts, but that the parts are ordered in some way. Further, these ordered parts are interdependent. The notion in systems theory that the parts of the system depend on one another in order to properly function, since they rely on one another to properly function. Being interdependent, the system enjoys the property of holism. The notion in systems theory that the whole is greater than the...
sum of its parts, or of being greater than the sum of its parts. But since the parts of the system must work together, feedback is required both to correct deviations and spread information that fosters growth. In addition to communication within the system, the organism requires exchange, which, in exchange for outputs, acquires the inputs or resources the organization needs to grow with its environment. Unless the system exchanges outputs in order to acquire the inputs it needs to function, then the organization will feed on itself and eventually die. But because the system is open and its boundaries are permeable, the organization benefits from negative entropy. If an organization acquires no resources from the surrounding environment then it will feed on and eventually exhaust itself; this is called entropy. But a healthy organization that interacts with its environment can acquire resources and thus grow or experience negative entropy.—that is, because needed resources can pass freely into the system, it can grow. Yet to handle inputs from the environment, the system needs the requisite variety, the notion in systems theory which states that an organization must a level of variety that is sufficient to deal with the level of complexity in its environment. to do so. In other words, the system’s complexity must be a match for the complexity of its inputs. If it does then the system will possess the trait of equifinality, the ability of an organization to achieve a given goal in more than one way, which means the organization has multiple means to achieve a given goal and need not depend on only one option.

Perhaps the most influential single theory to emerge from the systems approach was proposed in the 1960s by Karl Weick and refined by him in the next three decades. Weick, K. (1969). *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley; Weick, K. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. The theory begins with the observation that an organization’s environment includes information as well as material resources. Since the late twentieth century, the information environment has grown increasingly complex. Many communication situations cannot be handled by routines and rules. Moreover, the organization and its members both shape, and are shaped by, the information environment in which they operate—a principle Weick borrowed from the interpretive approach. Because all these factors introduce what he called “equivocality,” the goal of organizational communication is equivocality reduction, the notion in systems theory which states that an organization must reduce the amount of equivocality (uncertainty) they experience. To achieve the requisite variety needed to meet the challenges of a complex information environment, organization members’ natural response is the enactment of their own internal informational culture—again, a notion taken from the interpretive approach, and yet also an aspect of the interdependency predicted by systems theory. Next, Weick proposed a concept drawn from Darwin’s theory of evolution and natural selection. Though organization members have enacted an information environment, they each bring different interpretations of what that environment means. Thus, a part of the organizing process is selection, the best interpretations and then their retention to guide future enactments and selections. This collective process of enactment, selection, and retention allows the organization to respond to equivocality in their environments by enacting their own information system, selecting their best responses for reducing equivocality, and retaining them to guide future responses. Is, in Weick’s model, called retrospective sensemaking, the ability of an organization to achieve a given goal in more than one way, which means the organization has multiple means to achieve a given goal and need not depend on only one option.

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Interpretive Approach: Structuration Theory

Weick’s theory of organizing blends interpretive perspectives into a systems theory. But a key systems concept—that the parts of a system are interdependent—is given a new, interpretive twist through structuration theory. A theory proposed by Giddens to answer the question: Do people have free will or are they determined by their environments? He theorized that structure and agency are not a dualism but a duality. That is, people’s actions produce structure but, by acting within a structure, they also perpetuate or reproduce it. And its applications to organizational life. In traditional systems theories about organizations, the parts of the system are the various departments which have been hierarchically ordered to comprise an organization. But in structuration theory, the system is comprised not of parts (such as an organization’s various departments) but of human practices. In structuration theory, a system is comprised of patterns of activity which have meaning for participants, where practices are understood as patterns of activity which have meaning for participants. Thus, the organizational system is not the operations department, the marketing department, the accounting department, and so on. Rather, the organizational system is comprised of patterns of practices—from the way that sick leave is handled, to the way that purchase orders are processed, to the way that meetings are conducted. In structuration theory, then, “structure” is not used in the conventional sense of a hierarchy. Rather, structuration theory, the interrelationships between human practices. refers to the interrelationships between practices.

By basing notions of system and structure on practices, and defining practices as meaningful patterns, we can see how structuration theory reflects the interpretive focus on the social constructedness of human groupings. This move sprang from, as Marshall Scott Poole and Robert McPhee have related, the concerns of scholars in the 1960s who felt that the sociopsychological emphasis in communication studies did not adequately allow for communal effects. “[T]he properties of systems were most often cast as constraints on behavior that acted from outside the individuals involved,” such that individuals were not seen as agents involved in constructing those systems. Poole, M. S., & McPhee, R. D. (2005). Structuration theory. In S. May & D. K. Mumby (Eds.), Engaging organizational communication theory and research: Multiple perspectives (pp. 171–195). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; pg. 171. Then in the late 1970s and 80s, communication scholars discovered the work of British theorist Anthony Giddens. Giddens, A. (1979). Central problems in social theory: Action, structure, and contradiction in social analysis. Berkeley: University of California Press; Giddens, A. (1984). The constitution of society: Outline of the theory of structuration. Cambridge, MA: Polity. His theory of structuration resolved the structure-versus-agency debate with an innovative move. Giddens proposed that structure and agency are not “either/or” but are “both/and,” or as he put it, not a dualism but a duality. In other words, people create a structure through their actions—but they also perpetuate, or reproduce. In structuration theory, this refers to the way that people within a system perpetuate its structure by acting within that structure, and by acting within it. As Giddens explained, structure is both “a medium and an outcome” of social action. Structure not only constrains action but also enables it, even as action produces and reproduces the structure—and thus, we have the process of structuration which gives the theory its name. Individuals act within the structure’s enablements and constraints by drawing on shared rules. Structuration theory holds that individuals act within a structure by drawing on shared rules to guide their actions and by employing resources (whether material or nonmaterial) to take action, to guide their actions, as well as resources (whether material or nonmaterial) they can employ to take action. And as the process of structuration goes forward, a system of practices evolves which guides signification (how things are interpreted), legitimation (what is deemed moral and should be done), and domination (how power is distributed to get those things done). Nevertheless, people are mostly unaware that their actions are grounded in, and impact upon, larger structural process because their actions and consequences are separated in space and time.
Poole and McPhee outlined how structuration theory might be generally applied to communication studies and then, in the early 1980s, began exploring its applications to organizational communication. 

McPhee & Poole (1980). *A theory of structuration: The perspective of Anthony Giddens and its relevance for contemporary communication research*. Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association annual convention, New York. First, they suggested that structuration can explain the formation of an organization’s climate (a concept discussed in Chapter 6 "Organizational Communication Climate, Culture, and Globalization") or its “collective attitude, continually produced and reproduced by members’ interactions.”

Poole & McPhee (1983). A structurational analysis of organizational climate. In L. L. Putnam & M. Pacanowski (Eds.), *Communication and organizations: An interpretive approach* (pp. 195–220). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage; pg. 213. Climate emerges from a concept pool of shared terms and phrases that members use to describe the organization, culminating in a kernel climate as members adopt a commonly shared abstraction to capture their basic understandings of the organization, and then progressing into particular climates that guide members’ attitudes and actions in specific situations.


Further developments in organizational structuration theory have asserted that organizational communication occurs at three centers of structuration: conception, implementation, and reception. 

McPhee, R. D. (1989). Organizational communication: A structurational exemplar. In B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B. J. O’Keefe & E. Wartella (Eds.), *Rethinking communication: Paradigm exemplars, Vol. 2* (pp. 199–212). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage; McPhee, R. D., & Zaug, P. (2000). The communicative constitution of organizations: A framework for explanation. *Electronic Journal of Communication, 10*, 1–16. Though much overlap and conflict can occur, top management typically dominates conceptual communication, middle management oversees implementation, and employees receive and enact what has been decided. These communications may be classed into four flows that are respectively concerned with membership negotiation (who can be a member), activity coordination (what members do), self-structuring (how activities are organized), and institutional positioning (how the organization differentiates itself from others). Meanwhile, structurational processes also operate at the individual level to drive organizational identity (a phenomenon addressed in Chapter 8 "Organizational Identity and Diversity"). Through an identity-identification duality, the more that organization members are linked with other members who share the same premises, the more they will all cultivate a like identity for themselves and, in turn, be self-actualized by relationships with likeminded individuals.


Giddens’s original structuration theory addressed processes at the societal level and the institutions that societies create and sustain. A societal institution, he observed, can accrue and channel great power as it becomes a nexus for concentrating, organizing, controlling, and then projecting resources. As mentioned above, structurational processes govern how things are interpreted, what is deemed moral and should be done, and how power is distributed to do those things. This same attention to the ways in which power operates through a system has continued to be a concern for scholars who apply structuration theory to organizations. In looking back on two decades of theory development, Poole and McPhee believed, “Structuration theory . . . has the potential to bring a critical edge to the analysis of organizational systems because it charges scholars to look for the role of power and domination in structuring processes that underlie organizations.” Further, the theory “shows how organizations are created and sustained by human action and how, potentially, they can be changed.”

Poole, M.S., & McPhee, R. D., 2005, op. cit., pg. 180. Thus, they concluded, “We hope
future researchers will take a more critical stance in developing the future of the structurational perspective."Ibid, p. 192.

Critical/Postmodern Approaches: Feminist Theory


While feminist theorizing has generated a diverse body of research, some common themes emerge. Yet before describing these, let us review some ideas that retain a large influence on popular culture (so that you have probably heard about them) but do not represent current directions in feminist organizational communication studies. Karen Lee Ashcraft has recounted how research in the 1980s and 90s frequently focused on sex differences.Ashcraft, K. L. (2005). Feminist organizational communication studies: Engaging gender in public and private. In S. May & D. K. Mumby (Eds.), Engaging organizational communication theory and research: Multiple perspectives (pp. 141–169). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Women were depicted as “different” than men. Even if a “feminine style” of communication and leadership was celebrated as valuable, the notion nevertheless perpetuated a stereotype. Moreover, “feminine style” and “women’s concerns” were largely equated with those of middle-class white women. Finally, the workplace was seen as neutral territory into which individuals brought their sex differences and societal prejudices; organizations were simply places where people played out gender issues imported from the outside. Two decades of feminist organizational communication scholarship has altered this picture. The workplace is no longer viewed as neutral; instead, organizations are seen as profoundly gendered institutions and a primary source of gendering (i.e., configuring gender roles) in contemporary society.

To explain this phenomenon, let us begin with the basic concept of “male” and “female.” The concept inherently lends itself to “either/or” thinking or what scholars call a binaryAn opposition such as male/female, cause/effect, rational/emotional, leader/follower, win/lose, public/private. Feminist theory holds that binary thinking in organizations leads to the domination of “masculine” values such as competition over “feminine” values such as cooperation. mode of thought. Another binary common to Western society is the “mind/body” dualism which holds that the mind is nonmaterial and the body is physical. A tendency to think in terms of binaries, feminist scholars have shown, suffuses modern organization in
ways that (as critical theory tells us) work simultaneously to make “masculine” values dominant and yet hide that domination by making it seem natural. For example, the modern bureaucratic organizations is based on hierarchical ordering—which privileges the abstract (a “masculine” value) over the personal (a “feminine” value), establishes the workplace on the basis of individual categorization rather than egalitarian cooperation, and fosters a management/labor binary.


The connections between feminist theory and critical theory are clear. Today, a growing body of feminist research employs fieldwork and ideology critique to show how organizations reify and universalize “masculine” values. Recently, other feminist scholars have demonstrated how a postmodern approach to organizations can inform research by deconstructing how discourses of domination—such as male domination—have formed over time. An example is Ashcraft and Mumby’s study of airline pilots, a profession in which white males predominate. They documented how early aviators were romanticized as daredevils but, when the prospect of commercial aviation arose, celebrated “lady” pilots made aviation seem less intimidating. Then as commercial flights became a reality and the public worried about safety and reliability, the industry promoted the image of the fatherly (white) professional pilot in a crisp naval-style uniform. Ashcraft, K. L., & Mumby, D. K. (2004). *Reworking gender: A feminist communicology of organization.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Their project also explores issue of race and, as such, illustrates how in recent years the feminist approach to organizational communication has begun to encompass issues of race, class, sexuality, and ability.

As our look at systems theory, structuration theory and feminist theory affirms, modern theories of organizational communication are diverse. In addition, they afford opportunities for innovative, as well as blended, approaches to explaining problems of organizational life in the twenty-first century.
Key Takeaways

- Systems theory is based on the metaphor of the organization as a biological organization. Its parts, though hierarchically ordered, are interdependent and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Feedback between parts spreads needed information. But an organization is as an open system with permeable boundaries, engaging in exchange with its environment to gather resources required for growth. Because its environment is complex, the organization must have the requisite variety to deal with that complexity. This is aided through equifinality or the ability to take multiple paths for achieving the same goal. Karl Weick’s theory of organizing holds that information is part of an organization’s environment. Since the information is increasingly complex, a goal of organizational communication is equivocality reduction through processes of sensemaking.

- Structuration theory provides a new answer to the question: Do people have free will or are they determined by their environments? Anthony Giddens theorized that structure and agency are not a dualism but a duality. That is, people’s actions produce structure but, by acting within a structure, they also perpetuate or reproduce it. This is called structuration. Thus, structure is both an outcome of, and a medium for, social action. For Giddens, a system is comprised human practices that have meaningful patterns for participants. Poole and McPhee, and subsequent scholars, have applied the theory of structuration to explain the processes of organizational climate, organizational communication, and organizational identity.

- Feminist scholarship on organizational communication encompasses a diversity of approaches and theories. However, they share a conception of the modern organization as being gendered (rather than a neutral site where sex differences and societal prejudices play out) and as a primary site in the modern world for configuring gender roles. The male/female distinction reflects a binary mode of thought that suffuses organizations. Other binaries found in organizations include cause/effect, rational/emotional, leader/follower, win/lose, and public/private. Bureaucratic hierarchy “feminizes” workers by making them dependent, while basing organizational life on individual categorization rather than egalitarian cooperation.

Exercises

1. Where classical theory is based on the metaphor of the organization as a machine, systems theory is based on the metaphor of the organization as a biological organism. Make a list of other possible metaphors that might be used and explain how each one can help us understand the ways that an organization works.

2. In developing a theory of organizational structuration, Robert McPhee proposed that communication occurs in four flows: membership negotiation (who can be a member), activity coordination (what members do), self-structuring (how activities are organized), and institutional positioning (how the organization differentiates itself from others). Think of an organization to which you belong and then make a list of the types of communication that occur within each of the four flows. Can you identify any patterns or structures in these communication practices? Do these structures help people in the organization get their messages across and be understood? Or do they limit what people can say? Or both?

3. Again, think of an organization to which you belong. Name some examples of binary thinking (e.g., cause/effect, rational/emotional, leader/follower, win/lose, public/private) you have observed. How does this binary thinking affect what you have experienced in the organization? Does this type of thinking tend to make “masculine” values (e.g., competition, individualism, being rational, showing no emotion, taking action) more favored than “feminine” values (e.g., cooperation, integration).