Sommer, Lucie (Ph.D., Communication)

The Importance of Developing Robust Research Methodology for Studying the Communicative Constitution of Organization: An Exemplary Framework and Pilot Study
Thesis directed by Professor Timothy Kuhn

Abstract

Reaching beyond traditional conceptions of the relationship between communication and organization, scholars studying the communicative constitution of organization (or CCO) are charting new intellectual territory. They aim beyond a transmission view (where communication is understood to express already existing organizational realities), beyond an interpretive view (where the emphasis is on what members understand organizations to be and communication is viewed as the medium through which members’ develop shared understandings), and endeavor to articulate a constitutive view (where communication practices are treated as prior to and generative of organizational meaning and reality). Given these goals, it is not surprising that CCO scholars have gravitated towards intellectual paradigms that are located outside of the more traditional approaches (e.g. positivism, interpretivism). More specifically, they have consistently preferred a social constructionist approach, in general, and a practice-based approach, in particular.

This approach has resulted in valuable theoretical advances in terms of our understanding about the fundamental role that communication practices play in the constitution of organization. Scholarly attention to the methodological dimensions of this work, however, has been greatly lacking. My project aims to highlight the importance of this dimension, arguing that more deliberate consideration of methodological issues is a crucial part realizing the promise that practice theory holds for understanding CCO. Responding to this imperative, I identify a practice theory that is common in CCO scholarship (Giddens’ structuration theory, 1979, 1984) and I develop a carefully-considered methodological model for researchers employing this theory. I then pilot this model in an empirical study of an organization in a US university—an organization whose purpose is to coordinate the technology activities of diverse constituents (academic, administrative, and technical). Using the methodological framework I developed to guide my analysis (a critical discourse analysis framework), I examine the competing discursive practices of various organizational constituents and describe how these both reproduce and revise particular organizational realities (and the shared knowledge underlying these realities).

Key words: communicative constitution of organization, organizational knowledge, methodology, structuration theory, dialectic of control, critical discourse analysis, managerialist discourse
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................. 1
   The Relationship Between CCO Scholarship and Practice Theory .......... 1
   The Need For Deeper Consideration of Methodological Issues ............... 3
   Striving For a Balanced Theoretical-Empirical Focus ......................... 5
   Focusing on the Intersection Between Communication, Organization and Power ................................................................. 6
   Concern About Organizational Members Lived Experiences .................. 8
   The Example Of Managerial Discourse (and Ideology) ......................... 9
   Assessing the Threat Of Changing Discourse Practices ....................... 12
   The Loss of Tension in Empirical Applications of Practice-Based Theories... 13
   A Shortage of Methodological Discussion .................................. 14

II. METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH PRACTICE-BASED THEORIES ................................................................. 17
   The Common Thread Connecting Practice Theories .............................. 17
   The Parallel Interests of CCO Scholars ....................................... 20
   Additional OC Extensions of Practice Theory .................................. 21
   A Good Candidate for Analysis .................................................. 29
   The Alignment of Assumptions of the Inquiry Paradigms ...................... 30
   Variable Epistemological Assumptions of Practice Theories .................. 32
   The Need for Explicit Methodological Discussion ............................... 33
   Coping Through Quilting and Bricolage ....................................... 34
   Compatibility Issues Raised by Bricolage .................................... 37
   A Hybrid Research Approach: Ideals Versus Practices ......................... 39
   Contrasting Sets of Methodological Principles .................................. 39
   Pairing Uni-Dimensional Methodologies with Practice-Based Theories ...... 41
   Using Ontology and Epistemology to Inform Methodological Innovation ... 42
   Conclusion .................................................................................. 44

III. ROBUST METHODOLOGY FOR GIDDENS’ STRUCTURATION THEORY ................................................................. 46
   Connecting the Theory and Methodology of Giddens’ Work .................. 46
      Methodological Implications of the Agency-Structure Dialectic .......... 46
      Methodological Implications of Giddens’ Treatment of Social Reproduction ................................................................. 48
      Methodological Implications of Giddens’ Treatment of Knowledgeability ................................................................. 50
   The Beginning Contours of a Research Program ................................ 53
   The Methodology of Existing Studies ............................................. 54
   Applying Giddens’ Methodological Guidelines to Study the Dialectic of Control .............................................................................. 57
   Focusing and Tightening Methodological Discussion ............................ 59
      Tightening the Methodology for Studying Knowledgeability .............. 63
      Tightening the Methodology for Studying Unintended Consequences . 66
   Proposing Methodological Guidelines for Giddens’ Theory .................... 68
Methodological Guidelines for Studying the Dialectic of Control

The Value of the Proposed Framework

Conclusion

IV. METHODS AND METHODOLOGY DISCUSSION

Selecting My Research Site

Outlining My Research Design

Situating My Design within Existing Methodological Frameworks

Methodological Traditions

Data Collection/Analysis Methods

Defining the Particulars of My Project

The Discourses upon which Members Draw

Members Everyday discourse Practices

Data Collection Methods and Periods of Study

End of an Era

Transitional Leadership

CIO Takes the Helm

Summary of Existing Dataset

Data Analysis

Narrowing My Analytical Focus

Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources

Operationalizing Managerialist Discourse

Operationalizing Progressivist Discourse

Identifying Patterns in Discursive Practices

Tracking the Evolution of Shared Knowledge

Analyzing Unintended Consequences

Conclusion

V. INTRODUCTION TO THE ORGANIZATION OF TECHNOLOGY COORDINATION

The Formation of the OTC

The OTC’s Members and Constituents

Analyzing the OTC’s Early Discourse Practices


Changes in the IT Environment at WU

The Influx of Managerialist Discourse (2002-2006)

Two Discursive Resource Sets in Tension

Relating Changes in Discourse Practices to Changes in Authority Relations...

Proposed Changes in Governance Structures (2002-2006)

Moving from Static to Interactive Data

Preliminary Data Sorting

VI. ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE EPISODES FROM THE FIRST PERIOD OF MY DATASET

Narrowing my Analytical Focus

Analyzing Interactions from the OTC’s IT Council Meeting, April 2007

Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources

Defining the Knowledge at Issue in the Interactions

Identifying Patterns in Discursive Practices
Highlighting Changes in Levels of Determinancy
Tracking the Evolution of Shared Knowledge
Analyzing Interactions from the OTC’s IT Council Meeting, May 2007
Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources
Defining the Knowledge at Issue in the Interactions
Identifying Patterns in Discursive Practices
Highlighting Changes in Levels of Determinancy
Tracking the Evolution of Shared Knowledge
Conclusion

VII. ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE EPISODES FROM THE SECOND PERIOD OF MY DATASET

Analyzing Interactions from the OTC’s Community Gathering Meeting, August 2007
Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources (The Directors’ Presentations)
Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources (The Question and Answer Session)
Defining the Knowledge at Issue in the Interactions
Identifying Patterns in Discursive Practices
Highlighting Changes in Levels of Determinancy
Tracking the Evolution of Shared Knowledge

Analyzing Interactions from the OTC’s Community Gathering Meeting, April 2008
Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources (The Question and Answer Session)
Identifying Patterns in Discursive Practices
Highlighting Changes in Levels of Determinancy
Tracking the Evolution of Shared Knowledge

Analyzing Interactions from the OTC’s IT Council Meeting, November 2007
Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources
Defining the Knowledge at Issue in the Interactions
Identifying Patterns in Discursive Practices
Highlighting Changes in Levels of Determinancy
Tracking the Evolution of Shared Knowledge

Analyzing Interactions from the OTC’s IT Council Meeting, December 2007
Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources
Identifying Patterns in Discursive Practices
Highlighting Changes in Levels of Determinancy
Tracking the Evolution of Shared Knowledge

Summarizing the First Part of my Analysis

VIII. ANALYSIS OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES IN THE LAST PERIOD OF MY DATASET

Examining Patterns in Communication Practice Across Interactions
Analyzing the Relationship between Practices and Outcomes
A Description of my Analytical Model
A Snapshot of the Interaction Pairs
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Revisiting and Deepening my Initial Analysis of the Interaction Pairs.</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theorizing about the Etiology of Dominant Members’ New Discursive</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circling back to the Dialectic of Control</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracking the IT Council Group’s Shared Knowledge about Decision-Making</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>over Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readying my Last Set of Data (Central IT+’s Interactions) for Analysis</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing Interactions from the Community Gathering, Nov 2009.........</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources and Tracking the Evolution of</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing Interactions from the Coffee &amp; Conversation Meeting, Dec</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing Situation-Framing Resources and Tracking the Evolution of</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyzing the OTC’s 2010 IT Strategic Plan</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracking Central IT+’s Shared Knowledge about Decision-Making over</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of Research Findings</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying Assumptions</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting my Research Findings</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Contributions of my Study</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessing the Utility of my Analytical Framework</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributions to our Understanding of CCO</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of my Study</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Implications for Future Research</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Glossary of Terms</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Transcripts Used in Chapter 6</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Transcripts Used in Chapter 7</td>
<td>294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Transcripts Used in Chapter 8</td>
<td>301</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One: Introduction

A number of scholars who theorize about social institutions and all that they involve—human activity, material resources, knowledge, power, language, etc.—claim that an analytical focus on social practices is key to understanding these phenomena (e.g. Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Foucault, 1977, 1980; Giddens, 1979, 1984; Latour, 1987, 2005). Their insistence on a practice focus has not only fostered radically new kinds of understanding about these phenomena but also has served to highlight the importance of communication in the constitution of society and organization. Not surprisingly, these theories have generated a great deal of excitement among those centrally concerned with this discipline.

A small group of organizational communication (OC) scholars, for example, have been eager to interrogate these theories of practice—some with a more general interest in understanding how communication creates and maintains organization (e.g. Cooren, Taylor & VanEvery, 2006; McPhee, 1985, 2004; Taylor & VanEvery, 2000; Putman & Fairhurst, 2001; Poole, Seibold & McPhee, 1985, 1996) and others with a focused interest in the ways in which communication practices are tied to the negotiation of organizational power (e.g. Deetz, 1992, 2001; Kuhn, 2008; Mumby, 1988; Mumby & Stohl, 1991; McPhee & Zaug, 2000). Because they treat communication as “productive (i.e. an ongoing, generative process in which identities are born and transformed)” rather than as “expressive (i.e. a neutral conduit that transmits already formed selves and truths)” (Kuhn, 2003: 39), many from this group have come to be identified as scholars who study the communicative constitution of organization (CCO).1

The diverse efforts of these scholars have resulted in valuable theoretical advances in

---

1 Clearly there are other OC theorists who have contributed greatly to our understanding about how communication constitutes organization (Cheney, 1983, 1991; Cheney & Lair, 2007) and about how practice relates to communication (e.g. Craig, 1999, 2007). While their work is certainly relevant to my project, because they do not directly draw upon theories that are commonly recognized as “practice theories”, my discussion of their work is limited.
terms of our understanding about the fundamental role that communication plays in both the constitution and the negotiation of organization. At the same time, however, their work has revealed the challenges that a practice approach raises for empirical research. Corman, Kuhn, McPhee, & Dooley (2002) discuss this problem, writing,

As our emerging theories and models of communication grow in scope to embrace complex collective phenomena, we risk making them unworkable as guides for empirical research. Put simply, we worry that the existing body of communication research methods is incapable of handling the complexity being theorized in the discipline (Corman et al, 2002: 159).

A particular challenge for those using practice-based frameworks is to empirically capture the dynamic relationships these theories describe.

Scholars taking a practice approach acknowledge and endeavor to attend to several sets of dialectical relationships—relationships between agency and structure, stability and change, control and resistance, subject and object, mind and body—each of which they view as being integrally related to the others. All by itself, the agency-structure dialectic, (how the action of social agents influences the structural features of society and vice-versa), raises significant issues for the empirical researcher. Prime among them is the problem of research focus: that is, how to maintain a dynamic focus between two such fundamental elements. Add to that the additional dialectical relationships with which these theories are concerned (and the interrelationships among them) and research quickly becomes a complicated affair.

Despite these challenges, scholars interested in CCO issues have pushed forward and attempted to empirically document several of these relationships. For example, some have tried to capture the complex relationship between agency and structure (e.g. Guney, 2006; Katambe
& Taylor, 2006; Kuhn & Corman, 2003; Saludadez & Taylor, 2006). Others have focused their attention on documenting the tensions between control and resistance (e.g. Ashcraft, 2005; Banks & Riley, 1993; Deetz, Heath & MacDonald, 2007; Holmer-Nadesan, 1996; Howard & Geist, 1995; Jian, 2007; Knights & Morgan, 1991; McPhee, Corman & Iverson, 2007; Mumby, 1987; Simpson & Cheney, 2007; Thackaberry, 2004; Trethewey, 1999). As with the more theoretically-oriented projects that I reference above, these empirical projects are aimed at enhancing academic (and, in some cases, practical) understanding about the communicative constitution of organization, (although they vary in terms of whether they approach the subject of CCO in an “explicit” or an “embedded” manner, a distinction that I will explore a bit later in my discussion).

Critics, however, cite a tendency of these empirical researchers to favor one side of the dialectical relationship they investigate over the other—this is true both for those attempting to investigate the action-structure dialectic (such studies are reviewed by Fairhurst & Putnam, 2002) as well as those interested in the control-resistance dialectic (reviewed by Mumby, 2005). Given the complex empirical issues these practice-based theories introduce, these pulls are hardly surprising. The potential this line of inquiry has for furthering our understanding about organizational communication (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Banks & Riley, 1993; Cheney & Lair, 2007; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Grant, Keenoy & Oswick, 1998), however, provides strong incentive to continue the work these scholars have begun.

The Need for Deeper Consideration of Methodological Issues

As I demonstrate in my brief review, we can separate the work that draws on the practice

---

2 A number of scholars studying the constitution of organizational technologies have also investigated the agency-structure dialectic (e.g. Barely, 1986; Heracleous & Barrett, 2000; Orlikowski, 2000, 2002). While their efforts are relevant to my project (a subject I will later discuss in greater detail), they do not have an explicit interest in the communicative constitution of organization.

3 Jackson, Poole & Kuhn’s, 2002 review of scholarship that investigates the constitution of organizational technologies (what might be understood as a related area of research) points out similar tendencies of these projects to “tilt” towards one end of the dialectic or the other.
theorists according to the kind of focus the scholar has taken: theoretical versus empirical. This kind of distinction is quite common in reviewing OC scholarship. Also common is the association of theory with theoretical work and methods with empirical work. What tends to get lost in these distinctions is the idea of research methodology. Indeed, contemporary OC scholars tend to use these terms interchangeably (as do most social science researchers) (Grix, 2002: 179; Blaxter, Hughes, and Tight, 1997: 59). Arguably, the distinctions between these dimensions of study are subtle.

Most social science researchers commonly understand methods to be the “techniques or procedures used to collect and analyze data” (Blaikie, 2000: 8). While definitions of methodology are slightly more variable, most emphasize the idea that methodology is the set of principles (informed by both the ontological and the epistemological dimensions of a theoretical framework) that ought to inform researchers’ selection and use of their research methods. Because of the overlaps between the concepts, the boundaries between methods and methodology (and also between theory) are best understood as soft rather than hard. Given these conditions, teasing out the differences between these research dimensions is messy business.

For those interested in developing more robust research models to pair with the practice theories discussed above, however, this is necessary work. Scholars who treat organization as communicatively constituted have developed the theoretical foundations to apply towards this goal. Indeed, we have several well-developed CCO theories from which to choose (e.g. Cooren et al, 2006; Deetz, 1992, 2001; Kuhn, 2008; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Taylor et al, 2001, Taylor & VanEvery, 2002). These and other OC scholars have also begun to respond to the call for increased empirical work that engages these theories (e.g. Ashcraft, 2005; Guney, 2006; Katambe & Taylor, 2006; McPhee, Corman and Iverson, 2007; Saludadez & Taylor, 2006;
To date, however, most of these empirical projects fail to *explicitly* engage in methodological discussion.

For example, although Katambwe and Taylor (2006) briefly describe the analytical methods that they use to analyze their data (referencing pragmatist scholars within the conversation analysis tradition who influenced their approach, e.g. Austin, 1962; Labov & Fanshel, 1977), they are mute in terms of the methodological issues that guide these choices. In Guney’s (2006) and Saludadez and Taylor’s (2006) studies, even the discussion of analytical methods is quite sparse. Certainly the length of these kinds of case studies prohibits in-depth discussion of methodological issues. A brief mention of how the design of a study is aligned with its theoretical underpinnings and how these, in turn relate to the analytical methods selected is, however, clearly possible and, from my perspective, potentially very valuable. More specifically, I propose that more focused methodological reflection and discussion will help scholars realize the potential that these theories hold for our understanding of the communicative constitution of organization (and organizational power). A handful of OC scholars have begun to engage in this kind of work (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008; Taylor & Trujillo, 2004). The dissertation I propose aims to build on and to extend their efforts.

In general terms, then, my project involves examining the methodological issues associated with practice-based theories that have the potential to improve our understanding of the role that communication plays in the constitution of organization, in general, and of organizational power, in particular. This is obviously a massive project that requires the efforts of many. In this introductory section, I outline and justify my particular focus within this wide-scale project. I begin by discussing my motivations for pursuing such a project and by

---

4 While this is a relatively new focus in organizational communication studies, scholars in related fields have obviously pursued similar questions. New branches of research often inspire such inquiry, for example, the emergence of composition research as a field lead to Kirsch and Sullivan’s (1992) edited volume on methods and methodology. Although the scope of my project prevents me from conducting a full review of such efforts, future scholars who are interested in pursuing questions of methodology would do well to look beyond their disciplinary boundaries for insights.
identifying the particular communication practices I plan to study. Later, I identify the specific dialectical theory I propose to examine and the particular methodological issues it raises.

Striving for a Balanced Theoretical-Empirical Focus

As I indicated above, a number of CCO scholars are advocating for a closer relationship between the theoretical and empirical work associated with these dialectic projects (Cooren et al, 2006; Corman et al, 2002; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008). Their calls are based on the idea that quality scholarship requires a dynamic exchange between theoretical and empirical work. From this perspective, developing robust theories depends on applying and testing them in real-world, empirical settings.

Over the last several decades, CCO scholars have poured energy into developing (and interpreting and extending) various practice-based theories from a communication perspective (e.g. Cooren et al, 2006; Kuhn, 2008; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Orlikowski, 2000; Taylor et al, 2001, Taylor & VanEvery, 2002). Only recently, however, have CCO scholars begun to direct the same kind of energy towards the empirical application of these theories (e.g. Cooren, 2007; Cooren et al, 2006; Kuhn & Corman, 2003; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008; Orlikowski, 2002; Taylor et al, 2001). What has motivated CCO scholars to pursue these studies, at least in part, is the desire to balance the relationship between theoretical and empirical efforts, with the goal of improving the quality of both. My project is motivated by these same goals.

Focusing on the Intersection between Communication, Organization and Power

When I began my discussion, I pointed out that each of the practice theorists that I reference (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Foucault, 1976, 1980; Giddens, 1979, 1984; Latour, 1987, 2005) is concerned with explaining the process of creating, maintaining, and revising social order, a process that involves a complex weave of human activity, material resources,
knowledge, power, and language. Each of the theorists from my list emphasizes different parts of this process. Latour (1987), for example, is particularly interested in the relationship between human activity and material resources, challenging the distinctions that are commonly made between them. Foucault (1976, 1980), on the other hand, is primarily interested in teasing out the relationship between knowledge and language. While those who take a practice approach may emphasize different dimensions of social practice in their theories, all of them assume that a meaningful theory of social order necessarily involves theorizing about power (and resistance).

In contrast, only some (but certainly not all) OC scholars working to extend the communicative dimensions of these theories are committed to attending to this dimension. My own interest in the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) stems from a desire to better understand how this constitution influences (and is influenced by) the power relations among organizational members. This interest locates me between two different kinds of CCO scholarship.

In their review of CCO scholarship, Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren (2009) distinguish explicit and embedded strains of CCO thinking. They characterize scholars whose primary theoretical focus is on power (and/or culture and networks) as taking an embedded approach to their study of CCO (e.g. Deetz, 1991). They contrast this with studies that “take up the CCO question directly,” identifying two strands of scholarship: “structuration and text/conversation (a.k.a the Montreal School)” (2009: 9). The common thread between these strands, according to Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren, is their goal of providing:

an account that hones our understanding of how communication constitutes organizational reality, clarifies how communication works as an organizing mechanism, or illuminates communication (rather than, for instance, physical location) as the site of organization” (2009: 23).

While there are scholars within the explicit stream of CCO that pursue such questions with the
assumption that they cannot be understood without attending to the issue of power, the majority
do not. Indeed, this has been a common criticism of these works (Mumby, 2001).

In my case, I assume a tripartite relationship between communication, organization and
power. Linking this to the methodological emphasis I described earlier, I propose to focus on the
specific challenges researchers face in trying to empirically document the negotiation of power
relations inherent in CCO (and the related control-resistance dialectic). This focus has important
consequences in terms of the significance of my proposed project. To illustrate these, it is
helpful to tease out some of the assumptions underlying the work that explores the control-
resistance dialectic (work that includes scholars who are both primarily as well as secondarily
interested in the idea of communication).

Concern About Organizational Members’ Lived Experiences

Most scholars who study the intersection between communication, organization, and
power (both from an explicit and embedded approach) focus their analytic attention on the
symbolic dimensions of power, theorizing and investigating the degree to which organizational
members are able to influence organizational meaning. For these scholars, “Power is
conceptualized primarily as a struggle over meaning; the group that is best able to ‘fix’ meaning
and articulate it to its own interests is the one that will be best able to maintain and reproduce
relations of power” (Mumby, 2001; 601). At the same time, however, the material dimensions
of power strongly motivate those who engage in these symbolically-oriented research projects.
That is to say, those who pursue these studies (myself included) are concerned about the
experiences of locally-situated, organizational members and how their communication practices
impact the power they might exercise (or not exercise) in their everyday, organizational lives.

Many CCO scholars acknowledge the need to achieve a better balance between the
theoretical and empirical work associated with dialectical theories of practice (Broadfoot, Deetz & Andersen, 2004; Cooren et al, 2007; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008). While this goal is important for any body of work, it is especially important for the branch of CCO work upon which I propose to focus my dissertation because of the potentially significant consequences that the communication practices being studied have on the conditions of organizational members’ everyday lives. A more tangible example helps to illustrate this idea.

The Example of Managerial Discourse (and Ideology)

Those who assume that communication practices are integrally tied to issues of power are naturally interested in any significant changes in these practices because, from this perspective, there are potentially important consequences involved (in terms of autonomy/control) for organizational members. Numerous scholars studying the communication practices of the higher education (HE) setting have documented a dramatic increase in managerialist discourse (Delanty, 2001; Etzkowitz, 1997; Fairclough, 1993, 2003; Giroux, 2002; Gustavs & Clegg, 2005; Metcalfe, 2006; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Santos, 2006; Trowler, 1998, 2001; Vogel & Kaghan, 2001). Their concern is that managerial discourse—inextricably tied, as it is, to managerial ideology—has the potential to significantly alter the purpose and value of HE practice, and, in so doing, to alter the everyday lives of organizational members. Comparing the values associated with managerialist ideology with those traditionally associated with HE helps to explain these concerns.

Traditionally⁵, one of the primary goals of public and higher education institutions has been to produce well-informed, critical-thinking citizens, ready to participate in democratic society. From this perspective, colleges and universities are a place where students ought to be

---

⁵ Strands of this educational ideology stretch back thousands of years, to the earliest forms of higher education in ancient Athens. John Dewey (1916) is responsible for articulating these traditions as they relate to modern, American education. Many refer to the ideology he outlined as ‘progressivism’.
encouraged to “learn the power of questioning authority, recover the ideals of engaged citizenship, reaffirm the importance of the public good, and expand their capacities to make a difference” (Giroux, 2002: 450). Managerialist ideology significantly revises these goals. Rather than knowledge being defined as a tool to ensure democracy, knowledge is recast as a resource for stimulating the economy.

Knowledge as capital in the corporate model is privileged as a form of investment in the economy but appears to have little value when linked to the power of self-definition, social responsibility, or the capacities of individuals to expand the scope of freedom, justice, and the operations of democracy. (2002: 441)

‘Managerialist’ ideology also proposes a significantly different meaning of knowledge and its relationship to society than most educational ideologies. According to Trowler, this understanding is a “reductionist” one based on “rationalistic and market-based assumptions which stress economy, efficiency, and commodification” (2001: 187-188). From this perspective, knowledge is understood as “a resource, like money, which is possessed, stored, accumulated, and exchanged.” In contrast to other similar ideologies, managerialist ideology is often more explicit about the management of these processes. As knowledge is commodified into standard ‘products’ (or specific learning outcomes), the roles that people play in managing these products are altered. Within mangerialist ideology, “students are no longer active participants in learning but a totalized category having learning outcomes delivered to them” (2001: 189), in short, they become “consumers” of knowledge. The role that faculty play in this process also becomes much less important: “Standard portions of knowledge packaged into modules, supported by pre-prepared sets of materials and marketed as sets of desirable learning outcomes can be delivered by inter-changeable, non-specialist staff (2001: 190).” At the same time, administrative and technology professions have a great deal more control of the ‘product’ “in order to facilitate

---

6 For a more in-depth discussion about this reconceptualization of students, see Cheney, McMillan, & Schwartzman (1997).
market responsiveness and to ensure that structures and processes are honed to maximize economy and efficiency” (2001: 190).

What this discussion shows is that the ideology associated with managerial discourse (and related discourses) significantly revises both the purpose and values of HE and the meaning and value of knowledge. Because of the potential implications these changes may have for those who live and work in the HE setting, the influx of managerial discourse has been accompanied by a flurry of concerned discussion in HE circles. Most of this discussion focuses on the ideological changes occurring in the system (as opposed to the discursive nature of these changes), for example Slaughter and Leslie’s (1997) *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University*, Hayes and Wynyard’s (2002) *The MacDonalization of Higher Education*, and Bok’s (2003) *Commercialization of Higher Education* and similarly focused articles (Gustavs & Clegg, 2005; Metcalfe, 2006; Slaughter, Leslie & Rhodes 2000; Santos, 2006; Vogel & Kaghan, 2001). While these works underscore the importance of these changes, because they are ideology versus discourse-focused, they are not directly relevant to communication scholarship.

There are, however, several empirical studies of the influx of managerial discourse that are more discourse-oriented, making them much more interesting from a communication perspective (Fairclough, 1993; Giroux, 2002; Trowler, 1998, 2001)\(^7\). At base, each of these studies is aimed at helping members who work in the HE setting assess the threat that managerial discourse may pose to their ability to influence the purpose and goals of education. They are concerned, thus, with the constitution and negotiation of organizational power (and the dialectical relationships involved in these processes), dovetailing nicely with my research.

---

\(^7\) Delanty (2001) is another HE author who takes a discursive approach to understanding the changes in the HE setting. His work, however, is largely theoretical, and, therefore, less relevant to my project.
interests. Additionally, two of these projects—Fairclough’s (1993) and Trowler’s (1998, 2001)—are grounded in practice-based theories, making them especially relevant to my dissertation project.

Assessing the Threat of Changing Discourse Practices

Organizational members working in the HE setting who look to these studies for help in assessing the threat of managerialist discourse, however, will likely find them more frustrating than useful given the deep disparities between findings. The first two researchers, for instance, conclude that these shifts are causing fundamental changes for those who study and work in these settings, arguing that an increase in managerial discourse threatens faculty members’ authority/ability to influence how the meaning and values of higher education knowledge are defined (Fairclough, 1993; Giroux, 2002). Trowler (1998, 2001) reaches starkly different conclusions. According to his research, faculty members’ resistance to the values associated with managerial discourse is alive and well and, hence, so too their influence on what it means to work and study in organizations of higher learning.

In Giroux’s (2002) case, his conclusions are natural, unremarkable even, given the neo-marxist framework he applies. Fairclough (1993), however, borrows from several dialectical theories of practice (e.g. Bourdieu, Foucault, and Giddens) and Trowler (2001) uses Giddens’ (1979, 1984) ST as the foundation for his work. Despite the fact that both studies are grounded in theories that emphasize the dynamic relationship between control and resistance, one project primarily demonstrates the power that administrators (and the discourse they draw upon) have to control organizational meaning and the other, the power of less powerful members to resist these meanings. While Fairclough (1993) and Trowler (2001) lean to the side of this control-resistance continuum that one might expect given their theoretical commitments—Fairclough
(who favors Foucault and Bourdieu’s ideas) towards the control end and Trowler (who favors Giddens’ ideas) towards the resistance end, the extremitiy of the differences—Fairclough’s (2002) dire predictions about the threat of mangerialist discourse, as compared to Trowler’s (2001) solid confidence in actors’ abilities to resist potential dangers—are inconsistent with the practice-based theories that each has chosen.

The Loss of Tension in Empirical Applications of Practice-based theories

Comparing Giroux’s (2002), Fairclough’s (1993), and Trowler’s (2001) projects to research aimed at assessing the threat of managerial discourse in other organizational settings (e.g. Collinson, 1992; Deetz, 1992; DeCock, Fitchett, & Volkman, 2005; Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005; Nadesan, 1999; Simpson & Cheney, 2007; Townley, 1994; Zoller, 2003) shows that the HE researchers are not alone in their susceptibility to strongly favor one side of the control-resistance dialectic they study. If we understand these works as part of the larger body of literature that Mumby (2005) refers to as critical organizational studies, it becomes clear that they are part of a much larger pattern.

In his recent review of empirical research aimed at investigating the production, reproduction and resistance of organizational control, Mumby (2005) writes, “The field of critical organization studies has evolved around an implicit binary opposition that privileges either organizational control processes or employee resistance to such mechanisms of control” (p. 20). In his view, the primary reason for this divide is researchers’ failure to adopt a “dialectical approach” to studying organizational control and resistance (2005: 21). The paradox, as I have been discussing, is that many of the scholars included in these lists have grounded their work in theoretical frameworks explicitly aimed at more effectively explaining the dialectic relationships involved in CCO. At the same time, most have failed to meaningfully
analyze these dialectics (e.g. agency-structure, control-resistance).

This is certainly true for scholars who ground their research in some form of practice theory. Indeed, scholars who are drawn to these theories are often motivated by an explicit desire to avoid the dualisms of more traditional theoretical approaches. Holmer-Nadesan (1996), for example, employs Foucauldian theory as she attempts to document the dialectic of control-resistance involved in the impact of managerialist discourse on the identity work of female ‘service workers’. Giddens’ (1979, 1984) structuration theory has also been a popular theoretical framework (Banks & Riley, 1993, 1988; Howard and Geist, 1995; Mumby, 1987) for studying the control-resistance dialectic. Others have attempted to document Deetz’s communication-oriented version of practice theory (an approach that has strong ties to the work of such theorists as Bourdieu, Foucault and Habermas), applying his theoretical concepts of discursive opening and closure to empirical studies (e.g. Thackaberry, 2004; Leonardi & Jackson, 2004). Despite the use of these dialectical frameworks, however, Mumby argues that most of these studies are strongly biased in favor of the control side of the control-resistance dialectic (2005: 27).

These biases are not surprising given the complex research issues that these practice-based theories introduce. More specifically, projects employing these theories require research methods that are capable of documenting control and resistance, agency and structure and the dialectical tensions between them. Again, developing these methods requires significant dialogue between theoretical, methodological, and methods-oriented projects. While CCO scholars have begun this dialogue, there is more work to be done. Specifically, more attention is needed to the methodological dimensions of this discussion.

A Shortage of Methodological Discussion

Scholars studying the communicative constitution of organization, in general, and its
relationship to organizational power, in particular, have a wealth of theoretical resources from which to choose. Many of these scholars have chosen to ground their work in practice theories—theories that promise to help move them beyond a purely deterministic or interpretive analysis of how organizations are constituted. While the development of communication-focused practice theories has exploded in recent decades, attention to methods associated with these is relatively new. This recent turn in CCO scholarship, and the intersection between issues of theory and methods that it highlights, provides both the foundation and the inspiration for my project. In other words, these newly established intersections between theory and methods open up the possibility of new avenues of inquiry. Following in the footsteps of several OC scholars who are discussing middle-range methodologies (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Kuhn & Jackson, 2008; Taylor & Trujillo, 2004), I propose to look at a particular subset of these methodologies: practice-based methodologies.

When I began this introduction, I started with this very broad idea as the rough outline of my project. Through my discussion in this section, I have attempted to sketch my particular focus within this wide-scale project. I have narrowed my focus to the theoretical/empirical intersection associated with studying the dialectical relationship between control and resistance involved in the communicative constitution of organization. I have identified my motivation for focusing on this particular dialectic, namely, my concern for the way in which it impacts the ability/possibility that organizational members have to shape and influence the organizations where they work, and, hence, the content and the quality of their everyday work lives. I have also, in this section, identified a case where such study might be useful: the case of changing organizational communication practices in the HE setting.
Current research (Fairclough, 1993; Giroux, 2002; Trowler, 1998, 2001) evidences the dialectic between control and resistance in this case but does little to help us understand exactly what role communication practice plays in this dialectic (and the constitutive process in involves). OC scholars who have begun to interrogate the relationship between the theoretical and empirical work associated with practice-based theories have already begun to advance our understanding of these issues. Focusing my attention on the methodology associated with this approach, (as a handful of scholars have begun to do), I hope to extend the work they have begun. In other words, I propose to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between communication practice, the constitution of organization, and the power relations among organizational members. I hope my contribution might also help members of the HE organization I propose to study, (what I refer to as Western University’s Office of Technology Coordination), as well as organizational members in general, to more fully appreciate the relationship between their communication practices and their ability to influence the purpose, meaning and value of the work that they do.

To view this dissertation project in its entirety, go to:
