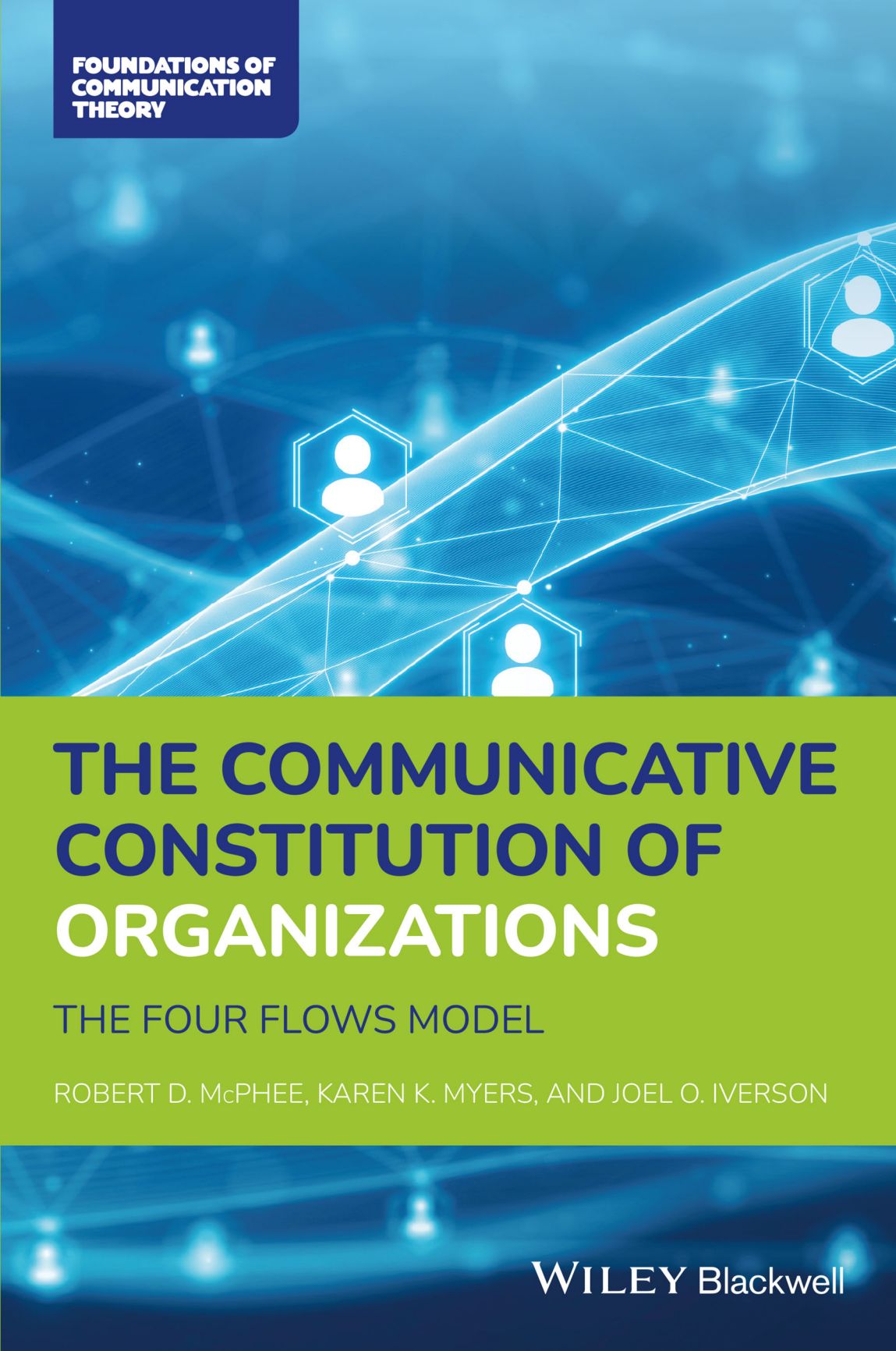




**FOUNDATIONS OF
COMMUNICATION
THEORY**

THE COMMUNICATIVE CONSTITUTION OF ORGANIZATIONS

THE FOUR FLOWS MODEL

ROBERT D. McPHEE, KAREN K. MYERS, AND JOEL O. IVERSON

WILEY Blackwell

The Communicative Constitution of Organizations

Foundations of Communication Theory

Series Editor

Marshall Scott Poole (University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana)

The *Foundations of Communication Theory* series publishes innovative textbooks that summarize and integrate theory and research for advanced undergraduate and beginning graduate courses. In addition to offering state-of-the-art overviews in a broad array of subfields, authors are encouraged to make original contributions to advance the conversation within the discipline. Written by senior scholars and theorists, these books will provide unique insight and new perspectives on the core sub-disciplinary fields in communication scholarship and teaching today.

Published

Health Communication Theory by Teresa L. Thompson and Peter J. Schulz. *Organizational Change: Creating Change Through Strategic Communication, Second Edition* by Laurie K. Lewis.

Theorizing Crisis Communication, by Timothy L. Sellnow, Matthew W. Seeger. *Theorizing Crisis Communication, Second Edition* by Timothy L. Sellnow and Matthew W. Seeger.

The Work and Workings of Human Communication by Robert E. Sanders.

The Communicative Constitution of Organizations: The Four Flows Model by Robert D. McPhee, Karen K. Myers, and Joel O. Iverson.

Robert D. McPhee

Arizona State University

Karen K. Myers

University of California Santa Barbara

Joel O. Iverson

University of Montana

**The Communicative
Constitution of
Organizations
The Four Flows Model**

WILEY Blackwell

Copyright © 2025 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved, including rights for text and data mining and training of artificial technologies or similar technologies.

Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, (978) 750-8400, fax (978) 750-4470, or on the web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, (201) 748-6011, fax (201) 748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permission>.

The manufacturer's authorized representative according to the EU General Product Safety Regulation is Wiley-VCH GmbH, Boschstr. 12, 69469 Weinheim, Germany, e-mail: Product_Safety@wiley.com.

Trademarks: Wiley and the Wiley logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and other countries and may not be used without written permission. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Further, readers should be aware that websites listed in this work may have changed or disappeared between when this work was written and when it is read. Neither the publisher nor authors shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

For general information on our other products and services or for technical support, please contact our Customer Care Department within the United States at (800) 762-2974, outside the United States at (317) 572-3993 or fax (317) 572-4002.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic formats. For more information about Wiley products, visit our web site at www.wiley.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Applied for:

Paperback ISBN: 9781119591924

Cover Design: Wiley

Cover Image: © Yuichiro Chino/Getty Images

Set 9.5/11.5pt Century by Straive, Pondicherry, India

Contents

Preface	viii
Acknowledgments	xiii
1 Introduction	1
1.1 Theoretical Grounding	2
1.1.1 Key Issues	6
1.2 Agency and Human Centrality to Human Social Systems	6
1.3 Materiality and Sociomateriality of Communication and Organizations	8
1.4 Power/Domination	10
2 Communication and Structuration Theory	12
2.1 Structuration Theory Tenets with Reference to Organizations	13
2.2 Structure: Rules and Resources	13
2.3 Systems	15
2.4 Agency	16
2.5 Duality of Structure	22
2.6 Modalities	23
2.7 Distanciation	24
2.8 Communication and System Structuring	27
3 Communicative Constitution	31
3.1 Structuration Theory and the Constitution of Organizing	32
3.2 The Structural Hermeneutic	34
3.3 Conlocutions	36
3.4 Constitution	37
3.4.1 Constitution of Signs	38
3.4.2 Constitution of Agents	39
3.4.3 Constitution of Organizations	41
3.5 The Modalities—An Augmented Formulation	43

4	The Four Flows Model	49
4.1	Flow and Constitution	49
4.2	Flows with Agency	52
4.3	The Materiality of Flows	54
4.4	Flow as Organizational and Communicative	55
4.5	Ways That <i>Flow</i> Departs from <i>Communication</i>	57
4.6	The Four Flows Model	60
4.7	Conclusion	64
5	Membership Negotiation	66
5.1	Moving from Outsiders to Insiders: Socialization Toward Membership	69
5.2	Previous Experiences and Their Relation to Membership Negotiation	73
5.3	Ongoing Membership Negotiation	76
5.4	Members' Relationship to the Organization	78
5.5	Materiality	79
5.6	Constitutive Effects	80
5.7	Drawing on Membership Negotiation	81
5.8	Conclusion	82
6	Flow Two: Self-Structuring	84
6.1	Type 1: Formal Structuring	87
6.2	Organizational Goals	90
6.3	Organizational Boundaries	92
6.4	Rules, Goals, and Other Formal Structuring	93
6.5	Emergence of Ideas of (Formal) Structuring	95
6.6	How Formal Structuring Constitutes Organizations	96
6.7	Formal Structuring and the Four Dimensions	97
6.8	Type 2: Information and Communication Technology	98
6.9	Bases of ICT	99
6.10	How the ICT System Constitutes the Organization	102
6.11	ITC and the Four Dimensions	107
6.12	Type 3: Culture	107
6.13	How Culture Constitutes Organizations	112
6.14	Culture and the Four Dimensions	113
6.15	Conclusion	113
7	Activity Coordination	115
7.1	Research on Coordination	117
7.2	HRO Activity Coordination	123
7.3	Supervisor-Subordinate Activity Coordination and Transtruction	125

7.4	Materiality	127
7.5	Activity Coordination between Coworkers and Transtruction	128
7.6	Conclusion	130
8	Institutional Positioning	131
8.1	Institutions and Organizations	132
8.2	Positioning by Individual Agents	134
8.3	Four Facets of Institutional Positioning	136
8.4	Organizational Identity	137
8.5	Social System Actant	139
8.6	Organization to Individuals	140
8.7	Organization to Organizations in the Institutional System[s]	141
8.8	Transtructions	142
8.9	Corporate Social Responsibility	144
8.10	Crisis Communication	146
8.11	Conclusion	148
9	Confluence of the Four Flows	149
9.1	The Confluence of the Flows	150
9.2	Flows as Foundational Theoretic Constructs for Organizational Communication and CCO Analysis	152
9.3	Strains and Contradictions, or Contraventions, Among/Within Flows	153
9.4	Confluence of the Flows at Micro, Meso, and Macro Levels	156
9.5	Deep Structures/Currents and the Confluence of the Flows	160
9.6	Conclusion	164
10	Contributions to the Ongoing CCO Debates	166
10.1	Confluence with Luhmann's Theory	168
10.2	Confluence with The Montreal School	174
11	Conclusion	180
11.1	Summary of Key Insights	180
11.2	Resources for Practical Appropriation of CCO Thought	182
	References	184
	Index	203

Preface

This volume in the series Foundations of Communication Theory takes up an important or even crucial issue in organizational communication research, and organizational studies overall: How do organizations exist? What is involved in a human collectivity *being* an organization? That is, how is something—a group of people or associated set of people and material objects—*Constituted* as an organization? We think it is important to answer this question with special awareness of today's capitalist corporations, which stretch across the world in one way or another, governed by varied regimes of corporate laws. However, a discussion of this issue must recognize, no less governments with departments and military arms that are themselves organizations, and nonprofit organizations and organizations comprised by *definite, explicit* alliances and collaborations of these, like NATO or the American Federation of Labor in the United States. Many scholars have noted that organizations can possess immense, world-shaking power—indeed, the array of today's complex organizations can claim to rule the world. (We should admit that emergent forms—the older one of liberal democracy or the relatively new collectivities like the Internet—may be harbingers of new interactive arrangements with, potentially, equal or even greater power—if they are not themselves colonized by organizations.) If we use a group of people in a pick-up game of tag, or a nuclear family, or a pair of people in a conversation, as our prototype for understanding organizations, we may well be misled into emphasizing features that are inadequate to characterize the powerful organizations underlying practically all our everyday activity.

This volume puts forward our own view of organizational constitution, which, we will argue, is especially good for treating the issues mentioned above. We call it the Four Flows Model of the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO). As we discuss later, it is surely a perspective, and might be a theory, depending on your definition of those terms. Obviously, we will be arguing that *communication* is what constitutes organizations—but only communication having certain features and interconnections. We will address merely in passing some equally basic and relevant issues, including those that Smith (1993), in a seminal paper for all of CCO, mentions as the questions of whether organizing, in a very broad sense, is the basic process underlying or constituting communication, and

whether organizing and communicating are essentially equivalent. We address these, in passing, mainly in Chapters 3 and 4, by discussing what it means for communication to have constitutive force.

We think of our model as one among many organizational and communication theoretic positions, including many contributing to our own ideas and many more or less contrary to ours. This means that our discussion in this volume had to be multilayered and recursive, with later chapters reorienting as well as simply building on earlier ones. That being said, we propose in the remainder of this Preface to trace through the argument about CCO developed in these pages.

Our first introductory chapter sets the stage for our own argument and exposition, by recounting, in its first part, the array of fundamental positions in social and communication theory from the mid to late twentieth century, up to roughly today. These include empiricist or systems theories, critical theories, and interpretive theories. For very influential statements of this distinction, see Habermas (2015) and Burrell and Morgan (1979). Some later perspectives, perhaps even more distinct, were articulated as post-structuralism and post-modernism by authors such as Derrida (1976), Foucault (1977), Lyotard (1984), and LaTour (2007). Those revolts transformed, but also became incorporated in, the interpretive and especially the critical perspectives. This clash among perspectives led the way to the impressive synthesis achieved by the theorist to whom we owe the most gratitude, Anthony Giddens. Then, in the second half of the chapter, we identify some core issues that inspire developments from the triad of main earlier theories, concerning agency (the unique capacities of humans), materiality, and power. These also helped frame the development of structuration theory.

The second chapter articulates structuration theory, and organizational/communication research developing it, in some detail. One central structural notion is the duality of structure: as humans interact, they draw on—use—the rules and resources of immediate context, language, and social order, while simultaneously reproducing—maintaining or transforming—those rules and resources for use in the very next act or episode, or more broadly as part of society. A second major notion is that of human agency—the sole type of *agency* in our perspective—for which Giddens' model elaborates the capacities agents need in order to interact meaningfully and effectively, and to produce/reproduce structural resources.

The third chapter elaborates our views of communicative constitution. Communication per se has constitutive power—it brings social realities into existence and makes them what they are. We develop several concepts to shed light on this process: Giddens' notion of *distanciation*—constitution as articulation of variance across time, space, and language; the *structural hermeneutic*—the interplay between whole communication processes and their constituent parts; *perlocution*—the constitution of social realities through language, specifically in organized settings; and *transtructions*—the rules or relations that intertwine the meaningful, power-laden, normative, and constitutive dimensions of social interaction. These four facets of constitutive communication provide conceptual

substance for our conception of communicative flow in the next chapter. We also discuss constitution of a sign or linguistic resource, and of a (human) agent, noting how those differ from constituting an organization, and discussing how all three are influenced by forces of social power and its distribution in interaction and society.

Based on these preliminaries, our fourth chapter explicates our idea of communication as flow. While *flow* has important differences from examples of communicative interaction, its positive analogies are strikingly useful in understanding organizational contexts. Like aquatic, electrical, or atmospheric flows, communication is dynamic: it moves temporally, but changes form and direction, and overflows preestablished channels. It is multidirectional and typically disseminates meanings and consequences. Its signs, whether written or nontextual, are material and accompany flows of other materials—people, fuel, and goods—while giving those larger flows meaning and significance. It can include currents with different speed, depth, and composition, and cross-cuts and roils itself in contradictions and paradoxes often enough that we find it appropriate to apply a flow label—contravention—to such strained social-interactive phenomena. Indeed, we find enough parallel and enlightening features and subtypes between physical and communicational flows to speak of flow as a model for communication in general. However, we end the fourth chapter with a more theoretic move, by articulating and justifying the distinction among the four flows of our 4F model, discussed in detail in the next four chapters, where richer accounts of their distinctiveness and relations can be found.

Our fifth chapter discusses our first flow: *membership negotiation*. Both these terms are important: *Membership* emphasizes that people's belonging, or connection as members, occurs as organizational agents become connected, through constitutive communication flows processes, into varying role-relational practices typically marked by varying activity expectations, hierarchic or power levels, and standard communicative ties (e.g., with bosses). *Negotiation* emphasizes that these connective processes—of search, actual hiring, and crossing the boundary onto the membership roster, then socialization into work roles, sharing narratives with other members to position themselves, actual work experience, and perhaps exit—are two- or multidirectional. In this communication, both members and organizational others negotiate, exercising agency based on power deriving from identity factors as well as past work and interactions. They negotiate tacit or explicitly, placidly, or turbulently to set or re-set the parameters of their relationships in processes through which the organization as a multi-member collectivity is constituted.

The sixth chapter concerns *organizational self-structuring*—a communication flow that is prototypically though not distinctly organizational—which influences members as they produce and reproduce overt or recognized resources, social-relational as well as material. Its influence typically structures the organization so that it can become a power vehicle or medium to serve the goals or interests of the collectivity—or, more narrowly, powerful members, groups, or

even outsiders. Through three types of overt self-structuring flow—the formal (authoritative texts and orders), the informal (cultural patterns), and the technological (infotech networks)—other communication gets constituted in its direction, its sanctioned use of an official or cultural vocabulary, and its legitimacy as it proceeds in the other flows. Now, a member may, for example, find that covertly cooperating to disobey an order, or consulting an illegitimate advice-giver, or using a friend's log-in, all “work” in their role activities. However, those interactions are still (deviant) self-structuring, probably reducing the organization's internal control, reliability, and effectiveness—or, perhaps, yielding greater overall success!

The seventh chapter analyzed our third flow, activity coordination, which constitutes the activities of organizational members so that they mutually adapt and combine to serve goals legitimated in the organization. It accomplishes both on-the-spot informal adjustments among members as well as on-the-spot—usually routine, sometimes inventive, and even sometimes deviating—application of structural mandates to divide up labor and communicate only in sanctioned ways. It constitutes the organization as the flow in which organizational work gets collectively performed, thus practically connecting members (Flow 1) and outsiders (Flow 4), as well as putting into practice the self-structuring influences of Flow 2.

The eighth chapter elaborates on our fourth flow, *institutional positioning*. Engaged in this flow organizational members and collectivities constitute the organization through activities and interaction that cross (and thus constitute) organizational boundaries, engage and influence members and activities of other organizations and collectivities, and thus produce an organizational identity. Thus, corporate social responsibility efforts (as well, unfortunately, as environmental pollution) rest on organized members' communication and coordinated activities outside the structured boundaries of a formally recognized organization. Efforts like social responsibility position the organization, through its members' responsible acts, in relation to (communicatively-constituted) institutions such as an industry, a sector such as education, an organized alliance such as the NBA, or even an organization so embedded and far-reaching as Meta or PBS. In this fourth flow, it is especially clear how the boundary-constituting force of each other flow, focused on in the earlier chapters, has impact on, and is even part of, Flow 4.

With the fifth through eighth chapters, we have set forth both the inner logic and the constitutive vitality of each communication flow in organizations, conceptualizing organizational constitution in a suitably variable and well-rounded way. Our final three chapters address some unavoidable issues facing a perspective like the Four Flows Model. First is the issue of confluence—the fact that a single interaction can be part of more than one flow, or even part of a single flow in more than one way. Indeed, that is commonly or even necessarily the case. Each chapter discusses this phenomenon in passing, but here, we focus on several key issues. One is the distinctive value of our model, compared to the numerous other category schemes for organizational communication. Another is the issue of strains and contradictions within and across communication episodes, a fact we

seek to reconceptualize with the term *contraventions*. A structural preference for clear, consistent, productive communication can be found in many if not most other positions, we have striven to expose and essentially include the many instances where organizational communication is roiled. A third is the fact that complex organizations are comprised of systems within systems of flows, so we discuss the varied ways the flows work at varied hierarchical levels. Fourth is the issue of deep structures—the fact that communication flows, or enacts contextual change, at varied levels. Societal features such as identity politics, work life and the contraventions it exhibits, global inequities of wealth, prestige, and power—these change more, even much more slowly than interaction or jobs. Yet slow-changing deep currents and shallow rapids can at times, roiled by volcanoes or global warming, depart from our expectations.

Our tenth chapter concerns parallels and likely disputes between our perspective and others, and focuses on the two most fully developed alternative models or perspectives. With regard to the first major alternate, the Luhmannian School, we try to convey our great respect for their work on the importance and variegation of social systemic closure, while forging our own sense of social system boundaries produced and reproduced in the flows. With regard to the other main alternative, the Montreal School, we hope we have articulated our equally great respect for the insights they have generated into the nature of agency in communication, while ourselves still advocating a baseline notion of agency as the powers and constitutive force of interaction by humans.

Our final chapter gives a final summary of the main points for which we have argued, followed by a number of suggestions of ways practitioners can employ our general perspective or specific insights in everyday life and work. Our belief is that readers and researchers will find special utility in our approach to CCO.

Acknowledgments

We are naturally grateful to the past generations of scholars in social and communication theory who have done vital work forging intellectual foundations for understanding the communicative constitution of organizations and elaborating superb insights that have inspired us. In particular, we must mention our primary forebear Anthony Giddens, but also Talcott Parsons and Karl Weick in general social theory, and Stanley Deetz, James Taylor, Francois Cooren, and Linda Putnam in organizational communication studies specifically. We owe a special debt of thanks to Scott Poole for encouraging, facilitating publication, and providing valuable suggestions that helped give this volume its final shape.

Bob is monstrously indebted to Joel and Karen for their cooperation over years and decades working out the four-flows position and its articulation in this book, for their patience and good judgment, as well as to the first student who worked with him on it, Pam Zaug. He is beholden in very many ways to Scott, along with Dave Seibold, for their collaborative work with him, over the decades, formulating the structuration-theoretic study of communication, as well as the wave of other colleagues who have built on, or formulated rivals to, that work. He wants to acknowledge appreciation to many other colleagues and students at the University of Illinois, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Arizona State University, and to several other specific individuals for support that contributed in inexplicable ways to this project. But he has been blessed above all by the encouragement, patience, and love of his wife Dale Kalika and of his son Karl.

Karen feels especially fortunate to have taken classes from and been an advisee of Bob during her doctoral program at Arizona State University. The classes he taught introduced her to structuration theory and the communicative constitution of organizations, both of which have shaped her research and the research of many of her own students and advisees. This book was an opportunity to honor and promote the enormously significant contributions that Bob's theorizing and writings have brought to the discipline, and to collaborate as well with an admired former ASU peer, Joel. Most especially, she is appreciative of her dear husband, Dave Seibold, who was supportive, and mostly patient, through the many years of work on this book.

Joel is grateful to Bob as a mentor, advisor, and colleague. His classes covering communication theory, organizational communication, and structuration provided rigor as well as humor while delivering a rich appreciation for academic work. This book is one way to extend our theorizing and continue the conversation regarding CCO theorizing with the community of scholars who engage in such work. He also thanks those who encouraged him to pursue theory such as his good friend, Pam Zaug, and many colleagues, including Karen. He especially appreciates the support and encouragement from his wife, Karen Iverson, and son, Ckhai Iverson.

Introduction

“The Communicative Constitution of Organizations” (CCO) has, since about 2000, been a focal point for considerable work by Communication, Organizational, and Social Theory scholars (Basque et al., 2022). From the beginning, several major theories have guided research and been the subject of much theoretical discussion. Schoeneborn et al. (2014) identified three of these, but some other alternative theories do exist, including—Weick’s organizing theory and Kuhn’s (2008) theorizing on materiality and communicative theory of the firm. One of these, “Four Flows” (4F) theory, is the focus of this book.

The 4F referred to are flows of communication; specifically, for any single organization, there are four “flows” of communication that constitute that organization—that make it what it is, an organization. There are four flows for organizations as well known as, for example, Apple Computers or Google or “the Mafia.” At one extreme of size, we could point to the United States Federal Government, while at the other extreme, one would find social entities on the borderline of being organizations at all—maybe a local Thursday Night Book Club.

There are two important purposes for this book. One is to be a fundamental resource for work in disciplines that study organizations, like the subdiscipline of Organizational Communication, or Business or Sociology. We want to say, “This is how to conceive of and study organizations, or at least one way to do it.” The second is to correct a common tendency in CCO theorizing, or at least advocate for a different flavor in that work, away from the question, “How do sociomaterial things, like an Apple Watch or the WWW, get constituted?” In a somewhat alternative direction, we emphasize that a major—we want to say **the** major—reason for studying organizations is that on the whole, they are social entities of a novel kind that rule the world. Companies like Google can span the world, own a major share

of world resources, and reconstitute major institutions such as capitalism. The United States Government can set out to “spread democracy”—to fundamentally alter the contents of “politics.” It is this kind of prototypical organization that we want to focus scholarly attention on (though, in varied ways, the focus is obviously already there). We urge CCO scholars to ask, “How are organizations communicatively constituted, such that they can (though obviously don’t always) wield such power?”

Answering that question is the goal of 4F theorizing and concretely of our book. In the chapters to follow, we will articulate the grounding of our work in structuration theory (ST), explain what a *flow* means, explain what the four flows are, and articulate their significance for CCO scholarship. In the remainder of this chapter, we lay out the context of our theory and the key issues CCO theories like ours should address.

1.1 Theoretical Grounding

Neither 4F theory, nor its parent ST developed in a vacuum. To explain the 4F vision specifically, we need to lay out some larger contexts and histories within which it lies. The obvious context is *Organizational Communication*, itself a subdiscipline within larger intellectual contexts, especially *Communication* or *Communication Studies*, which are in turn inside a major category *Social Theory*, including allied disciplines such as anthropology and sociology.

Long ago, works in social theory gave birth to another important subdiscipline, organization studies, recognizing bureaucratic communication as an important feature of nascent forms of economic corporation as well as in long-established organizations such as governmental departments or the Catholic Church. Students of organizational communication, inspired by or coming from these disciplines, study not just one but many sorts of communication processes and phenomena that are relevant to organizations and organizing, drawing on ideas and methods from many scholars and conceptual schemes. Rather than try to organize on our own the welter we have today, we can employ an old, simplified, deceptively clear overarching distinction displaying the main currents of social/communication theory that ground the work of organizational communication scholars.

Organizational communication ideas themselves developed from three specific constellations of ideas, each with ancient ancestry and stultifying mutations. First is a set of conceptions of *general systems*, theories that actually elaborate ideas from hundreds of years Before Common Era (BCE). But modern ideas about systems developed, in novel insights and prominence, in the mid-twentieth century, as scholars and engineers tried to build on the analogy comparing complex machines, including military artillery, automobiles, electronic devices, and simple computers, to the human body. One key analogy they advocated involved the sources generating coordinated motion among system parts: in machines and electronics, coordination is achieved through electrical current flow and

microwaves, while in the human body, the nervous system coordinates physiological processes. In this view, every person or group has their own role in the system and vaster ecology of systems, and action governed by the role is valid, right, because it sustains the whole.

All sorts of systems seem, to many systems scholars, to generate system needs and values, which can in themselves explain and validate member activities and organization attributes. Thus, a systems theorist would say that a company has a public relations department or a CEO describes company plans in an interview because the company needs good relations with publics, such as stockholders—it finds good PR to be necessary for its existence. (Contrariwise, 4F theory, to foreshadow our argument, will reject the idea that the organization is a giant agent tending to its needs. Instead, we will contend that the necessity of PR or any other function is the result of communication among individual agents that necessitates—communication that makes, e.g., PR *seem* necessary to powerful agents—that perhaps points out problems caused by inadequate PR, or advocates copying PR practices in other, successful firms—in arguments and decision processes that may or may not succeed in inculcating PR for the company, perhaps even leaving that company's constitution weaker.)

Systems theorists quickly ventured further, to argue that larger social units—relationships, groups, nations, and also in the mix, organizations—were also systems that could be studied using that analogy. Human communication in general could be construed as a series of signals/messages with measurable impact and often important feedback. Such interactive signals typically traced out a network of message interchange that integrated the overall system and helped it operate, just like the electronic signals that initiate and even power auto engines. (Such systems can, of course, also go haywire.) Just as for nonhuman systems, maintaining system performance is an overriding value, but social systems also involve cultures; cultures feature their own religious and moral value systems; all these values are system elements, functioning above all else to unify but stratify the systems. It is important to remember that, today and into the past and future, the metaphor of system, and of message flows integrating and coordinating it, is an enduring resource of communication, and especially organizational communication theory.

In a predictable dialectical swing, another group of scholars, today called critical theorists, argued that social systems theories, in their deepest notions, reflect and reinforce the worldview of currently empowered people, groups, or classes. System models insinuate that the current power distribution is simply there or unavoidable or optimally adjusted. Critical theorists instead argue that every element of social existence has an inner logic of development that generates external relations essentially opposing it, a contradiction that transforms their very essence. Thus, excellent and fulfilling work today conflicts with a simple fact: people work under conditions imposed by corporate powers that benefit from excellent work but still downplay the factor of workers' excellence to maximize profit. Some excellent employees can win promotion to higher-level work managing or "facilitating" others, subject to orders from above. Most of those "others,"

even ones equal in performance excellence, stay at unfulfilling lower-salary levels, to make the whole unit most profitable. A similar global process derogates some workers worldwide to be underpaid, constricted, stunted, deluded, and often have miserable roles, lives, and relationships. This occurs because work is monetarized, allowing its value to be controlled and expropriated to increase profits far beyond the return for management coordination and capital risk that is objectively their due. They also argued that monetarization leads to supposedly fair markets, but employees negotiating work and for organizational financial support can be manipulated using monopoly power, maximizing the inequality of distribution and control of work.

Critical theories today have evolved far past the Marxist economic-class focus and an emphasis on the multivariant consequences of economic inequity—the multiple, intersecting dimensions of injustice and bias (toward differences in race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and occasionally class or age) where violence and disgusting suppression efforts evince deep structural roots. Critical theory has been distinguished first by its strong emphasis on the workings and varieties of social power phenomena such as intermember relations, formations like social-practical knowledge, representation, and privilege/disadvantage, which then unclearly exhibit (or sometimes hide) biased and deeply rooted institutional/macrosociosystemic forces. The focus on power, and domination of individuals such as workers leads tendentially to a focus on the *limits* of human agency, with people as puppets at the mercy of power-bearing cultural and organizational forces. The second truly distinguishing feature of critical theory has been its fundamental value commitments. Critical scholars argue that all social/communication theory, like all human endeavors, is guided and lured by value judgments about features of today's situation and possibilities of change. However, research committed to the value of analyzing *what is*, whether the social system today or people's interpretive frames, inevitably slides toward acceptance of *what should not be*, and neglects reflective inquiry about the causes of absolutely foundational systemic bias.

We can best describe a third traditional variety of theory by noting its opposition to the first two variants. Interpretive social science opposes systems theory because of the willingness of the latter to invent variables based on outside theories or quick glances at the processes being examined. And they oppose critical theory's imposition of crucial concepts like class, ideology, and even Western notions of power. Interpretive theorists were inspired by philosophic schools, including idealism, phenomenology, existentialism, and pragmatism, along with some ideas and methods from anthropology, rhetorical studies, and literary criticism. They argue that meaning and significance do not derive in any simple way from the natural objects and processes we observe, nor from the definitions and syntax of languages we are taught. Rather, we develop, in collaboration with our conversational partners, a sense of language and event meanings that is grounded in context and the practices engaging us with the world, other people, and ourselves.

For interpretive scholars, organizations (and all social phenomena and processes) are communicative in their essence. It is no surprise that several

interpretive concepts have been prominent on organizational communication research. The most well known of these is *organizational culture*. Several decades ago, the idea that organizations have unique cultures, including stories and keywords, was fresh, but soon was transformed by findings that organizations are in every way cultural themselves, with cultural elements that are vague, localized in distinct milieux, and internally conflicting with one another. A second prominent conception is *organizing* (and a correlate term *sensemaking*)—not the noun organization, but the verb. The parent of this conception, Weick (1979), argued that organization is a meaning-generating process starting from any initiating event or act (often by a manager), blossoming in a plethora of equivocal meanings. One or a few of these are selected to retrospectively interpret the initial act and give sense to inform/organize the consequent stream of acts/processes, and the relational forms characteristic of organizations. The sensemaking process thus inescapably generates a negotiated order (Clarke, 2021; Strauss et al., 1963), adjusting and intertwining the action and meaning threads of parties to the organizing. The focus of this school on meaning-making and its variability leads to a tendency to study communication processes in quite fine detail without seeking to generalize patterns that are discovered.

The three idea-clusters, systems, critical, and interpretive, have intertwined, clashed, and metamorphosed for decades or centuries, but remain easily detectible in organizational communication research and organize some of the intellectual clashes in organizational studies as well. In particular, the interpretive cluster of theorizing and research seems increasingly to recognize the power-ladenness and inescapable biases in the language, rhetorical figures and topoi, and communicative practices—biases articulated by critical as well as rhetorical scholars. Contrariwise, critical scholars have become evermore articulate about the amazing variations of the meaning of fundamental concepts like work and the individual worker (Mumby, 2019), but perhaps without fully critiquing the impacts of their own critiques or insights that might come from systems concepts.

ST was created by Anthony Giddens to transform the analysis of relations among these titanic intellectual conceptions. Giddens argued, as we shall see in detail in the next few chapters, that all action by individuals, and all institutional forms such as democracy and capitalism, answer the inquiries of all three groups of scholars because they involve three dimensions of social being, that we label meaning, power, and norms. Giddens argued that these dimensions have different importance, or loadings, for any act, communicative process, or social unit. As explained in Chapter 3, we emphasize the specific interweavings of these dimensions, called *transtructions*. This idea allows sensitive exploration of relations, for instance, between meanings/ interpretive schemes and power imbalances, just mentioned in broad strokes. We find it vital to add to the triad of dimensions by elucidating a fourth, independent dimension of social action and social orders, called *constitution*. This will let us reconceive the relation of communication to organizations. It grounds our theory of CCO. The *4F* are flows of communication (broadly construed, as we shall explain later) with varying constitutive significance, inevitably

tangled by transtructions with the meaning, power, and value phenomena dividing past intellectual traditions. We cannot explore this issue in any depth in this first, introductory chapter, but even the discussion so far indicates how deeply 4F theory analyzes the communicative constitution of organizational phenomena.

1.1.1 Key Issues

The theorizing of the four flows approach has not emerged independently from other perspectives, but rather is developing as part of the dialogue about CCO and larger issues for organizational scholars. Specifically, we explain our theoretical developments through conversations regarding the other key schools of CCO thinking as well as important issues such as critical perspectives regarding organizing. Three of the key but inextricably overlapping issues that we address in this volume are the issues of:

- Agency, and *human centrality to human social systems*
- Materiality *and* sociomateriality of communication and organizations
- Power/domination in all its forms, as emphasized especially by the critical approaches to understanding organizations

We contend that ST, the 4F theory, and its underlying processes of conlocutions and transtructions (in subsequent text and in later chapters) offer a useful approach to advance the conversation regarding all of these issues, especially as they need to be part of any valid CCO thinking. We also contend that conlocutions and transtructions within the four flows provide a means to empower critical theorizing and explore issues of power, structure, and material history. While more details of these processes emerge through the book, a general description of the 4F position on each is useful.

1.2 Agency and Human Centrality to Human Social Systems

While agency has had many definitions across disciplines and approaches since the 1960s (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), for us, agency is grounded in the capacity of involvement via social practices to not only make a difference, but also have the capacity to consider those differences as meaningful and value-relevant. While some approaches to agency in CCO theorizing remain grounded in explanations of firms through agency theory (Barnard, 1938; Coase, 1937 among others) working to explain the relationships of principals typically owners, to agents, or employees who act as agents of the principal (for a more complete explanation, see Brummans, 2018). We consider the *acting for* approach fundamentally tied to concepts of ownership and authority that do not work well with critical approaches