MAJOR ERAS OF ORGANIZATIONAL (COMMUNICATION) THEORY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

COMMUNICATION 4170: APPLIED ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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I. CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVES (1900-1930)

Some general assumptions:
- A "science" of organization will lead to greater efficiency and production.
- Organization owners should strive to control all organization resources.
- Individuals who follow orders and work hard can improve themselves.
- Workers respond to rational-economic motivation.

Example #1: Scientific Management (Frederick Taylor)
→ One "best way" to complete any task
→ Select personnel scientifically
→ Compensate by production, not position
→ Managers plan; workers implement the plan

Example #2: Bureaucracy (Max Weber)
→ Clear, hierarchical system of authority
→ Division of labor according to specialization
→ Complete, "universal" system of rules re: personnel rights & responsibilities
→ Exhaustive procedures for work performance
→ Selection and promotion based on technical competence
→ Impersonal member relations

Status of communication:
- Viewed as a managerial tool to command and control workers
- <u>Function</u>: Emphasis on production & maintenance
- <u>Structure</u>: Formal, hierarchical, & downward
- Informal, horizontal, & social communication = obstacles that should be squelched

II. HUMAN RELATIONS & RESOURCES (1930-1965)

Some general assumptions of the Human <u>RELATIONS</u> movement:
- "A happy worker is a productive worker" (shift from objective work design to social dimensions of work).
- Organizations should reflect more democratic values and open communication.
- Informal communication is inevitable and useful to managers (for example, to assess and influence employee satisfaction).

Example #1: Managers & (Mis)communication (F. J. Roethlisberger)
- Management is a verbal activity involving the use (i.e., persuading) and interpretation (i.e., listening) of language, which is variable and emotional
- Management based on two assumptions—(1) workers are strictly economically motivated and (2) communication with workers should only be about facts—is deeply flawed. All members have personal histories and emotional needs that must be considered.
- Good managers facilitate open communication and seek to understand worker perceptions.

Example #2: Organizational communication "climate" (Jack Gibb)

DEFENSIVE CLIMATE	SUPPORTIVE CLIMATE
Evaluation	Description
Control orientation	Problem orientation
Strategy	Spontaneity
Neutrality	Empathy
Superiority	Equality
Certainty	Provisionalism

Some General assumptions of the Human RESOURCES perspective:
- Motivation is economic, social, and related to a worker's sense of self-worth.
- Workers are untapped resources, wasted by most organizations. Most workers can take initiative and enjoy contributing to worthwhile objectives.
- Managers should create an environment in which workers can pursue individual & organizational goals simultaneously.
- Participation leads to better performance and, thus, improves morale.

Example: Douglas MacGregor and Theory X & Y
- If work enabled self-esteem and self-actualization, motivation could be "built in" to the work process. But first, we must challenge common managerial assumptions about workers:

THEORY X	THEORY Y
1. People dislike work, prefer to avoid it	1. People view work as natural as play
2. Workers are not ambitious, prefer direction	2. Workers are ambitious, prefer self-direction
3. Workers avoid responsibility, are indifferent about organizational goals	3. Workers seek responsibility, feel rewarded through their achievements
4. Workers must be threatened w/ punishment to achieve productivity	4. Workers are self-motivated, require little supervision
5. Workers are not highly intelligent, not capable of creativity	5. Workers are smart and creative
6. Human resources are inherently difficult to manage	6. Human resources are usually wasted; management should create environments in which they flourish

- **Related example: Rensis Likert** identified 4 management systems: (1) Exploitative-Authoritative, (2) Benevolent-Authoritative, (3) Consultative, (4) Participative

Status of communication in the HRs:
- Viewed as a tool to coordinate, increase morale, and tap members' creative resources
- Function: production & maintenance (defined more broadly), limited innovation
- Structure: formal & informal; hierarchy yet some decentralization; downward communication still stressed but with increasing concern for upward & horizontal

III. SYSTEMS THEORY (1960-1980)

Some general assumptions:
- We need to better understand the nature of organizations, which function like living organisms in that...
    - they are the interdependent, patterned activities of many parts and subsystems
    - they depend on interaction with their environments
    - they must accomplish both stability and adaptation
    - they too encounter life cycles: birth, development, maturation, and death

Example #1: Open Systems (Katz & Kahn)
- Organizations are open, self-renewing systems that ingest energy from the env't (input), transform that energy (throughput), and expend it back into the env't (output).
- They are characterized by (a) cycles, (b) negative entropy, (c) coding and positive & negative feedback, (d) steady state (or "dynamic homeostasis"), (e) differentiation & hierarchy mixed with integration & coordination, and (g) equifinality.
- Organization (a) function = outcomes that yield the source for renewing the cycle that will reproduce those outcomes and (b) boundaries = activities with no relevance to the function

Example #2: Communication Networks
- Communication network: emergent patterns of interaction among organization members
- Network properties: (a) links, including content (nature of topic), mode (medium or channel), density (actual vs. possible links), reciprocity (one-way vs. mutual); (b) cliques (sub-groups), (c) roles (e.g., opinion leader, liaison, bridge, group member, isolate)
- "The strength of weak ties"

Status of communication:
- Viewed as ongoing & constitutive, a feedback loop to manage stability-adaptation
- <u>Function</u>: system "blood," organizes (note the verb!) work (production, maintenance, & innovation) and continually (re)builds structure
- <u>Structure</u>: Informal, networked, multidirectional

IV. CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES (1980 - ??)

Some general assumptions:
- There is (virtually) no objective or factual reality of organization. Members collectively (re)produce that reality as they negotiate meaning. That is, communication reflects *and* creates a distinctive organizational culture, which shapes how work gets done.
- Organizations are (or have?) cultures in that they are...
    - a common frame of reference (e.g., shared values & practices) for interpreting and acting toward one another and the surrounding world
    - the negotiated order that arises from the interaction of various subgroups
    - a stage on which members perform, as actors with roles, masks, scenes, scripts, etc.
- We can best "know" organization by studying how members negotiate systems of meaning, so ethnography is a particularly appropriate research method.

Example #1: Comparative Management
- Culture is imported into organizations from national, regional, and/or ethnic influences
- Specific example from Hofstede's work on cultural variability: Cultural differences on axes like power-distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, and individualism/collectivism become manifest at work. Organizations tend to adapt to local cultures.

Example #2: Corporate Culture (or a managerialist, functional approach)
- Culture is something an organization *has*—an asset or possession to be managed toward enhanced performance. Emphasis on culture as unified across an organization.
- Specific examples from "Strong" (Deal & Kennedy) and "Excellent" (Peters & Waterman) Cultures: Strong cultures enable members to understand and identify with their work and each other. Strong culture = supportive business environment, dedication to shared vision and values, well-known corporate heroes, effective rights and rituals, formal and informal networks. Excellent cultures = a bias for action, close relations with customers, autonomy and entrepreneurship, productivity through people, value-driven, "stick to the knitting," maintain a simple form and lean staff, simultaneous loose-tight properties.

Example #3: Cultural Symbolism & Performance (or an anti-managerialist, interpretive approach)
- Culture is what an organization *is*—a performance that is ongoing, communicative, contextual, episodic, and improvisational. Emphasis on culture as unstable, negotiated, and variable across an organization.
- Much like a play, an organization has heroes, heroines, and villains whose goals, values, and practices indicate important features of the shared "script."
- Several features constitute organizational culture (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo): (a) relevant constructs (organizing structures, including persons, objects, activities); (b) facts (social knowledge that explains the mundane); (c) vocabulary (local lingo or vernacular); (d) metaphors (symbolic images for capturing experience); (e) stories (narratives that typify experience and display values); and (f) rites and rituals (recurring practices that provide outlets for sensemaking, celebration of values, and so on).

Status of communication:
- Viewed as the ongoing activity through which organizational realities are created, expressed, maintained, and transformed
- Function: maintenance & innovation, defined in terms of meaning systems
- Structure: mostly informal & emergent (but ex. #2 = formal & strategic), multidirectional

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V. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES (1985-??)

General assumptions:
- First, a nod to origins: Marx's critique of work amid capitalism (late 1800's)—alienation, exploitation, & false consciousness
- Organizations are political. That is, organizational communication (re)produces systems of power, which are not neutral or random but, instead, promote dominant interests.

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- Organization theory also supports dominant interests. Even the so-called neutral cultural theorists (see example #3 under "Cultural Perspectives") do so with their silence about power, so let's move beyond their interest in *consensus & how* to uncover *suppressed conflict & why* (emphasis on culture as contested).
- Some key concepts: (a) domination (i.e., certain groups enjoy privileged access to the means of production & expression); (b) ideology (i.e., deeply embedded worldviews make domination seem "normal" or "natural"); and (c) consent & hegemony (i.e., members ironically preserve the power of an elite few in the name of self-interest).
- <u>Goal of research</u>: To expose and critique taken-for-granted relations of power toward emancipatory social change. More "invisible" forms of control require careful attention.

Example #1: Corporate Colonization (Stanley Deetz)
- The corporate sector has become the primary institution of U.S. society, and it has colonized most areas of our lives (e.g., government, family, education, media).
- Our capacity to participate in democracy has gradually eroded (e.g., our needs our narrowly defined; capitalist bureaucracies breed passive employee-consumers, not active citizens; the majority can/do not participate in corporate decisions).
- Yet, because colonization is unobtrusive, we do not scrutinize the scope of corporate power as we do other social and political trends.
- To revive democracy, we must expose the consequences of colonization and work to ensure the political and workplace participation of multiple stakeholders.

Example #2: Feminist Perspectives
- Some beliefs that bind diverse feminist approaches: Organizations are "gendered" in ways that tend to privilege (some) men/masculinity. Such inequalities are unethical, impractical, and changeable. Research can expose how inequality works and thereby improve the working lives of women *and* men.
- How are organizations gendered? Consider (a) communication norms, (b) the public-private split, (c) informal networking activities, and (d) metaphors for business.
- How is organization theory gendered? Consider current theories of leadership succession, which presume that a leader's tenure remains unscathed by "private" needs.

Status of communication:
- Viewed as a process of systematic distortion and social change
- <u>Function</u>: maintenance, but in a different, "deep structure" sense—to make inequality seem legitimate (or to "manufacture consent"); innovation, also in a different sense—to liberate and transform
- <u>Structure</u>: concerned with the processes & outcomes of hierarchy—formal and informal, surface and deep