

RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR BERGER'S ESSAY: ITS MEANING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

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Fact No. 1: My academic endeavors over a period of about three decades make it impossible for me to hide my affiliation with that area of study we call "organizational communication." Fact No. 2: This area is one of those "contexts" charged with contributing to the delinquency of communication theorists. Nevertheless and notwithstanding some reservations, I find myself in hearty agreement with Professor Berger's (1991) basic arguments. Although I believe these arguments are valid for the field of communication generally, I choose to focus here upon organizational communication specifically.

Especially deserving of applause, because it epitomizes a perennial problem besetting organizational communication, is Berger's (1991) forthright announcement that too many communication researchers have allowed themselves to serve as "mere hypothesis testers for theoreticians in the cognate areas" (p. 104). I shall return to this topic later; but first the "context" issue must be addressed—an issue on which I confess to having mixed feelings.

That "fragmentation" can lead to parochial, myopic, and trivial scholarship is beyond question. However, I suggest that specific hypotheses, deduced from highly abstract theories, can and should be tested in specific contexts (whether in laboratories or the "real world"). We spend perhaps a third of our lives as members (or victims) of formal organizations. And most of these organizations display certain characteristics that can be viewed not only as outcomes of communication processes, but as powerful forces influencing many of the ways human beings communicate. These characteristics, to mention only a few of them, include complex structures, coordination devices, authority and status hierarchies, division of labor (task specialization), interrelated roles (with resulting role demands and constraints), and a very large number of features related to the conflicting requirements of control and autonomy.

If one wishes, therefore, to examine communication phenomena as they can be observed actually operating in such an environment, why not go directly to that environment (whether real or simulated)? Such a strategy facilitates the discovery of important boundary (or scope) conditions of theories. In addition, the organizational context provides fertile soil for the germination of ideas and concepts that, in turn, can contribute to the building of new theories. This has happened, I suggest, in those social sciences, such as psychology and sociology, where specialized organizational studies have flourished for decades. Who would toss out, for example, the theoretical contributions of such figures as H.A.

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Simon (a Nobel Laureate), James March, Lyman Porter, Rensis Likert, Peter Blau, Amitai Etzioni, Chris Argyris, or Karl Weick?

In short, although I recognize the ever-present danger of pointless fragmentation, I also hold that there is no built-in incompatibility between "contexts" and theory development.

Next I would second Berger's (1991) judgment that "it is doubtful that the field of communication has gained or will gain a great deal of respect from relevant cognate areas by producing a literature consisting mainly of introductory textbooks, no matter how well written these textbooks may be" (p. 105). Although the area of organizational communication has not spawned the proliferation of basic textbooks that we associate with such subjects as public speaking or "business writing," and although most of the modest number of books that have been produced are of high quality, it remains true that a great many organizational communication specialists (including myself) have spent countless hours as consultants or trainers.

First, let it be understood that, in my view, skills-oriented instruction, whether in college classrooms or "adult" workshops, is a perfectly honorable and defensible enterprise. Indeed, if we acknowledge the validity of the notion of "empowerment" (pardon the current buzz-word!), can we derogate the social utility of work designed to help citizens to articulate their thoughts—coently, responsibly, and persuasively? Moreover, as I have argued in earlier papers (Redding, 1979, 1983), consulting, *when scrupulously observing ethical and professional constraints*, not only (a) performs a valuable "therapeutic" function; it also can (b) provide a rich source of theory-relevant ideas, and can (c) serve as an informal testing ground for nascent hypotheses. (Note that the verb is "can," not "will.")

However, having said all this, I still take my stand beside Berger. Those of us who present ourselves as serious researchers of organizational communication had better see to it that we never—absolutely never—fall into the trap of claiming academic acceptance primarily on the basis of our efforts (no matter how brilliant) as skills instructors.

That some of us have fallen into this trap cannot be ignored. But a remembrance of things past, while not for a moment excusing past errors, helps us to understand those errors and therefore to generate remedial action. Berger has wisely devoted thoughtful attention to what he calls "historical legacies." In that same spirit, I now call to mind selected historical legacies that, in my view, go far toward explaining the kinds of problems we keep wrestling with in the study of organizational communication.

First, we need to recall that graduate programs in this field are a fairly recent development, dating back no farther than about 1950. Moreover, the earliest graduate courses were little more than hastily improvised extensions of their undergraduate and "adult education" analogues. And these analogues were consistently skills-oriented. Especially influential in its ultimate impact on academic curricula was the explosion of training courses and workshops in "basic communication skills" that burst upon the scene during World War II. Industry, shaken out of its depression-era doldrums, faced the problem of training, almost overnight, millions of newly hired employees. The federal government

responded to the crisis by instituting a gigantic enterprise called TWI, "Training Within Industry."

As college enrollments plummeted, platoons of professors, especially from English and speech departments, found themselves on factory floors and in conference rooms, conducting quickie TWI-inspired workshops in "communication skills." When the war ended, the concept of basic courses, similar to the TWI model, swept across campuses from coast to coast. As a legacy of their TWI experience, which had pushed them into deep involvement with business, industry, and the military, a small cadre of speech professors concluded that organizations constituted a special context, justifying special courses, for the study of communication.

These professors (who represented no more than a dozen campuses) shortly took the leap of creating graduate work, even at the Ph.D. level, in what was at first designated "business and industrial communication." And so, by the mid-1950s, a few doctoral dissertations had emerged. Thus was born a new "context," within the speech field. (For a more detailed exposition of the history of organizational communication, see Redding, 1985, and Redding & Tompkins, 1988.)

Especially noteworthy is the fact that a clear majority of the early Ph.D. dissertations (i.e., roughly speaking, those awarded between the mid-fifties and the late sixties) addressed research problems closely related to alleged deficiencies in communication skills. (In fact, the same can be said of many research studies published in the 1980s.) To be sure, most doctoral researchers attempted to apply selected "theoretical" concepts to their "skills"-related topics. But where did they find the concepts?

The answer "almost everywhere" is true. However, a more careful answer would accord great prominence to a body of thought that most of us today would recognize as "human relations." The intellectual father of human relations, it is generally agreed, was the famous social psychologist Kurt Lewin. It was Lewin, celebrated as one of the most brilliant social-science *theorists* of the present century, who developed the conceptual rationale, along with many specific instructional techniques, associated with "sensitivity training." Shortly before his death in 1947, Lewin was busy planning the first "T-groups" to be offered at Bethel, Maine. Bethel, the headquarters of the National Training Laboratories (NTL) later became the Mecca of the "human potential" movement. (For detailed accounts of the history of NTL and Lewin's role in its founding, see Back, 1973, and Marrow, 1969.)

Now we come to a crucial fact. On the one hand, Lewin and his followers constantly proclaimed allegiance to the goal of building theory. And, indeed, the current literature of the human-potential establishment repeatedly proclaims the importance of theory. On the other hand, however, the actual conduct of T-groups, encounter groups, and their innumerable offspring reveals a preoccupation with skills training. (The very name National *Training* Laboratories is, of course, significant.) But the key question is: What kind of skills? Observation of what was really going on behind the closed doors of typical T-groups leaves no doubt that the central concern was (and still is) communication skills.

Originally, the emphasis was upon skills related to interpersonal and small-group interaction, such as "openness" and "giving and receiving feedback."

Before long, however, the claim was made that these skills (under the rubric "group dynamics") were essential for *organizational* effectiveness. Thus, to epitomize in one sentence events that spanned a period of several years: Ideas and training practices emerging from T-groups provided the conceptual—one could say, the quasi-theoretical—underpinnings of one of the most influential paradigms in the history of organizational studies, "human relations" (see, for example, Perrow, 1986).

Since human relations doctrines were so obviously related to their interests, researchers in industrial (later organizational) communication quickly seized upon human relations as a reservoir of ideas and concepts. For at least twenty years, from about the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies, most studies completed under the rubric of organizational communication were the beneficiaries of wholesale transfusions of terminology, concepts, and "theories" (more precisely, prototheories or quasi-theories) from the human relations blood bank. Researchers were preoccupied with such concepts as "supportiveness," "openness," "consideration," "participative decision making," Likert's "System 4," and the like.

None of this is to ignore another important legacy, too obvious to require elaboration here. I refer to that truncated and watered-down version of rhetorical theory typically promulgated in public speaking, "business speech," and English composition courses of the 1920–1950 era. Neither should we ignore the undoubted impact of the Dale Carnegie courses, with their hundreds of thousands of students, drawn predominantly from business and industry. The rationale and the influence of the Carnegie doctrines constitute in themselves a topic crying out for in-depth research. Space limitations do not permit further discussion of either the rhetorical or the Carnegie legacies. But their influence was undoubtedly very great.

The conclusion to be drawn from this brief historical excursion is clear: Here is a field of study (a "context") whose very *raison d'être* induced its practitioners to devote their energies (a) to skills instruction, and (b) to the conduct of "applied" research. Hence, historically speaking, it has been uncommonly difficult for specialists in organizational communication to shift their conceptual gears from low to high, from the pragmatic to the theoretical.

In due course, as is well known, the human relations paradigm was almost battered into oblivion as an army of critics pounded it with heavy intellectual artillery. (I do believe, incidentally, that communication scholars were slower than our social science colleagues in recognizing its mortal deficiencies.) However, as advocacy of human relations became unfashionable, researchers in organizational communication appeared to accelerate their borrowings from "outsiders" (defined arbitrarily as those whose institutional affiliations are other than "communication"). This process is still going on, of course; I suspect the traffic from outside to inside is about as heavy in 1991 as it was in 1981 or 1971.

For many years these outsiders, most of them social scientists of one kind or another, have been busily at work producing communication concepts, communication hypotheses, and communication theories. This state of affairs stems from the well-known fact that communication is such a pervasive phenomenon in human behavior that it "belongs" to no single discipline or department. No

statutes exist making it unlawful for researchers in any of the "human sciences" to study whatever aspects of communication suit their fancy.

But in the case of organizational communication, this truth hits especially close to home. Starting with the classic Hawthorne studies of the 1930s, social scientists of various persuasions have been prolific generators of concepts, theories, and empirical studies dealing with communication behavior in organizational settings. It comes as no surprise, then, that a very large proportion of research studies in organizational communication cite more sources from the social sciences than from communication.

It is important to note that outsiders have created many of the concepts and theories that are so basic we simply take them for granted now as indispensable components of the body of work constituting the field of organizational communication. A catalogue of all these contributors would require a separate book. I mention only a few of the better known names: Barnard, for his communication-based theory of organization; Hemphill and Fleishman, for their (admittedly controversial) factors of leadership, defined in terms of communication behaviors; Simon, for his theory of organizational control, based upon the inculcation (i.e., communication) of decision premises; March and Simon, for their concept of "uncertainty absorption"; Janis, for his theory of "groupthink"; Giddens, for his "structuration" theory, in which communication is centrally implicated; and Weick, for his ingenious theory of organizing, with communication processes as building blocks.

With contributions like these (and many more could be added), perhaps it is no wonder that researchers in organizational communication have so often allowed outsiders to do our theoretical homework. (There are those who would prefer a harsher metaphor: that we have permitted others to beat us to the punch.) One inevitable outcome of all this is that the theoretical landscape of organizational communication reveals (ironically) very little organization; it presents a picture of numerous conceptual boulders, of various sizes and shapes, very few of which form meaningful clusters. Dare I suggest it needs the services of Berger-trained landscape architects?

To be sure, a number of creative thinkers have made significant progress in the last few years. Some have generated plausible categories under which concepts or theories could be grouped. For example, two chapters in the *Sage Handbook of Organizational Communication* (Jablin, Putnam, Roberts, & Porter, 1987) propose, between them, no fewer than seven "perspectives" (see Euske & Roberts, 1987; Krone, Jablin, & Putnam, 1987). Others have tried their hand at actually constructing new, communication-specific explanatory theories, albeit with some components borrowed from those ubiquitous outsiders. Two examples: Tompkins and Cheney (1985) have woven together H.A. Simon's concept of decision premises with Aristotle's enthymeme to produce a theory of "unobtrusive control" in organizations. And Fulk and Boyd (1991) have outlined four proposed theories in areas related to the underlying concept of information processing.

Yes, progress is being made. But what can be said about the present state of theorizing in organizational communication? Almost ten years ago, William H. Starbuck, a knowledgeable observer and former editor of *Administrative Science*

Quarterly, asked an analogous question about the field of organization studies. His assessment:

Organization theorists have carried out numerous studies of so-called objective phenomena, and their aggregate finding is that almost nothing correlates strongly and consistently with anything else. (Starbuck, 1982, p. 3)

In all probability, a similar assessment could be made of the state of theorizing in organizational communication in 1991. Hence, I endorse Professor Berger's basic position. However, until three conditions were accepted, I would withhold my final signature:

Condition No. 1. The word "theory," a notoriously elastic term, should not be interpreted so rigidly as to include only the "classical" (hypothetical-deductive, or variable-analytic) model. I would urge the utility of generating, for example, "descriptive quasi-theories" (Mohr, 1982, p. 219). And I would encourage graduate students to begin by applying their imaginations to the creation of typologies, advancing next to prototheories, and then to theories of the middle range.

Condition No. 2. I would also encourage, along with building and evaluating formal theories, the exploration of other routes to the advancement of learning, such as the historical, rhetorical, ethnographic, and critical-theoretic modes. In other words, I see no advantage in restricting ourselves solely to the theory track.

Condition No. 3. I would resist a doctrinaire view of the "applied-theoretical" (or "practical-pure") dichotomy. I agree that applied research can glorify the trivial, but experience has left no doubt that valuable theories can indeed emerge from work that many would classify as "applied." For an instructive example, I can recommend careful study of Weick's (1987) blow-by-blow account of how *communication* theory can be generated by astute analysis of data collected in the course of solving a practical organizational problem. I close with the words of the distinguished scientist (and Nobel Laureate) Peter Medawar:

"How neat!" one scientist might say of another's work—or "How ingenious!"—or, "How very illuminating!"—but never, in my hearing, "How pure!" (1982, p. 38)

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