Chapter 5
The Process of Theorizing in Organizational Communication:
On the Importance of Owning Phenomena

Paul Leonardi
University of California – Santa Barbara, USA

ABSTRACT

Theory building is central to the academic enterprise. So it should come as no surprise that members of a discipline periodically question the purpose of their theory building. For the past few decades, organizational communication researchers have asked this question, and some have been brave enough to provide some suggestions. This chapter argues that owning phenomena in this way is key to advancing a science of communication. I offer two strategies by which theorists can make advances toward owning phenomena: discovery and reconceptualization. Through these strategies, they can demonstrate how that organizational phenomena are, at their core, communication. There are surely other strategies that theorists might use to gain ownership of phenomena. This chapter represents a meager call to organizational communication theorists to move past the tendency to look for communication in a phenomenon and to treat the whole phenomenon as communication. The latter approach is likely to help us to build better theory about communication and to make better explanations about the process of organizing.

INTRODUCTION

Theory building is central to the academic enterprise. But, what is the purpose of their theory building. For the past few decades, organizational communication researchers have asked this question (Deetz & Eger, 2013; Krone, Jablin, & Putnam, 1987; Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009; Reardon, 1996; Redding, 1979), and some have been brave enough to provide some suggestions (Deetz, 2001; Mumby & Stohl, 1996; Taylor, 1993). Across these various efforts, the high-level answer is always the same: We should study communication as it relates to organizations and the process of organizing. Since we are a discipline of communication, this is understandable. But what does it mean to study communication? I don't dare answer this question, but I will provide a personal anecdote.

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I earned an undergraduate and master's degrees in organizational communication. During this early training I read textbooks on organizational communication, digested handbooks (red ones and blue ones), and attended NCA and ICA several times. Then, I earned a doctorate in an organization studies program in a school of engineering, and I read other handbooks (most were white) and went to other conferences. When I graduated, I took a job in a communication department. After a four-year absence from an ICA meeting, I showed up eager to re-engage. But I was shocked by what I heard. Most presenters began their talk with some variation of, "Today I'm going to discuss the role of communication in Topic A" or "My paper takes a communicative perspective on Topic B." Most respondents offered comments such as, "These were all wonderful papers, but I would like to encourage the authors to more clearly articulate with is really communicative about Topic C," or "The data are very interesting, but I think the authors would benefit from taking more of a communication-based perspective on Topic D." It seemed that everywhere I turned someone was claiming that they were adopting a communication lens on something, or someone else was critiquing them for not focusing enough on communication. Today, countless NCA and ICA's later, and after countless reads of new textbooks and new a handbook (a grey one this time), I still see the question, "Where is the communication in this?" nearly everywhere I turn. I did not remember this line of questioning from my formative days as a student of organizational communication. I first wondered if the field had changed during my four-year hiatus from it - if everyone suddenly became obsessed with foregrounding communication in everything they did. But over time, I've come to accept that my sojourn away made the familiar strange and, I must admit, it has yet to become familiar again.

I share this anecdote because it suggests one clear way that members of our discipline think about the question posed above: Studying organizational communication means focusing attention on key communication phenomena. This approach replaced and expanded the decades old practice of studying only overt communication within organizations (e.g., the way people spoke, the way they wrote, etc.) (Axley, 1984; Goldhaber & Krivonos, 1977). While this was a noble, it limits our opportunity to build high impact theories because it is a strategy of subordination. By strategy of subordination I mean that when a scholar argues that he or she is adopting a "communication perspective on… (for example, power)," the implicit assumption is that power is a core organizational phenomenon and communication is somehow subsidiary to it. In other words, "communication" is one part of power and the scholar who takes a "communication perspective" on the phenomenon will showcase that piece of the power phenomenon and discuss why it is important. This often results in a "communicative theory of power" in which the communicative or discursive properties of power are brought to the foreground and the argument is made that we can have no power without communication.

Few would disagree with the assertion that there can be no power without communication. Any critic who wished to sidestep the study of communication in a phenomenon like power could simply say, "Sure, how power is communicated is important, but it is no more important than X." And, if scholars adopt a strategy of subordination when building theory, they will not be able to disagree because taking a "communication perspective" on power has compelled them to simply find the communication in the power dynamics amongst all of the other important processes that are surely there. To take this idea a step further, a strategy of subordination often leads researchers of this field to take phenomenon that are "owned" by other scholars and to try to put their distinctive stamp on them. The major problem of such a strategy, is that it allows scholars who consider themselves students of power, but not students of communication, to argue that one feature of leadership is communication and that part is the province of communication.