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Schoeneborn, Dennis

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Book Review:

Building Theories of Organization: The Constitutive Role of Communication

Dennis Schoeneborn, University of Zurich, Switzerland

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In the field of organization studies, an increasing number of scholars show an interest in a theoretical stream called “communication constitutes organization,” often abbreviated to “CCO” (e.g., Ashcraft et al. 2009). The main claim of this view, which originates in the transdisciplinary field of organizational communication, is that organizations primarily exist in and through communicative processes that become interconnected over time (Taylor & van Every 2000). Although critics rightfully point out that the idea of the communicative or discursive construction of organizations is far from new, there are two features that distinguish this theoretical endeavor from its various ancestors and siblings: First, by definition, the CCO view is primarily concerned with the *ontological* status of organizations (Bisel 2010), addressing one of the most fundamental questions in organization studies: *what is an organization?* (e.g., Taylor & van Every 2000: ix). Second, CCO scholars go well beyond this basic question, with the aim of exploring in depth *how* communication constitutes organizations (Putnam & Nicotera 2010).

The 2009 volume *Building Theories of Organization: The Constitutive Role of Communication*, edited by Linda L. Putnam and Anne Maydan Nicotera, tackles precisely these theoretical interests. Because of its structure and scope, the volume has

played a pivotal role in developing this line of thinking – and in branding the acronym “CCO”. The opening article by Putnam, Nicotera, and McPhee (Chapter 1), provides us with a brief and concise introduction to the historic background of the CCO view. The authors highlight that the CCO view is particularly suitable to study the dynamics of organizations as processual phenomena. In the same context, the authors draw a crucial distinction between communicative constitution and construction, emphasizing that “an analysis of constitution tends to ‘unmask’ a phenomenon, thus revealing the contingency of and work required to sustain an organization” (p. 4).

After this introduction, the book simulates the structure of a debate: a reprint of McPhee and Zaug’s article “The Communicative Constitution of Organizations: A Framework for Explanation” (2000), presented in Chapter 2, serves as the reference point for all subsequent chapters. In that article, the authors approach theoretically the question of what it is that makes communication *organizational*. Drawing on Giddens’s structuration theory (1984), the authors identify four “flows” that collectively constitute organizations as phenomena of communication: *membership negotiation* (i.e., interactions that link individual members to each other and establish an organizational boundary), *self-structuring* (i.e., self-reflexive interactions aimed at the design and control of organizational processes), *activity coordination* (i.e. interactions in which organizational members or groups dynamically adapt to situational circumstances), and *institutional positioning* (i.e., interactions that shape an organization’s relationship to its environment, e.g., to customers, suppliers, competitors, and other stakeholders). The next two chapters extend McPhee and Zaug’s framework (Chapter 3 by McPhee and Iverson) and examine its empirical application (Chapter 4 by Browning et al.), while the final two chapters offer a critical

view of their framework and make alternative theoretical proposals (Chapter 5 by Cooren and Fairhurst and Chapter 6 by Taylor).

In Chapter 3, McPhee and Iverson usefully detail the “four-flows” framework and illustrate each flow with examples drawn from their case study on the “Comunidad de Cucurpe,” a community of corporations in the Mexican state of Sonora. Browning et al. (Chapter 4) apply the “four-flows” framework to the empirical case of a US Airforce Base. They arrive at the conclusion that the four flows are inherently entangled in practice, which is fully in line with McPhee and Zaug’s assertion that these flows are only analytically distinct; the organization, in fact, emerges at their intersection. The question arises, however, to what extent the assessment of Browning and his colleagues is compatible with McPhee and Zaug’s other assertion, that all four flows typically occur at distinct “sites,” which renders the organization a multi-site phenomenon.

In Chapter 5, Cooren and Fairhurst criticize the “four-flows” model for its too reductionist, top-down approach to organizations. Instead, the authors propose that organizations should be reconstructed from the bottom up, that is, by exploring how various local interactions “scale up” to collectively form and stabilize the social phenomenon we call organization: “It is this *source of stability* that needs to be unveiled” (p. 123; emphasis in original). Cooren and Fairhurst suggest that, in order to understand organizations, researchers should focus on various forms of materiality and “non-human agency” (e.g., by texts or other artifacts) which stabilize the organization as a communicative phenomenon and which allow its constitutive communicative processes to “distanciate”, that is, to become available beyond their initial occurrence in space and time.

In Chapter 6, Taylor provides us with one of his densest and clearest accounts on his theory of co-orientation (Taylor & van Every 2000). Similarly to Cooren and Fairhurst (Chapter 5), Taylor discusses McPhee and Zaug's "four-flows" model against the background of his endeavor to develop a theory of organizations from the bottom up, that is, by acknowledging the dynamic interplay between local and ephemeral *conversations* on the one hand, and *texts*, as the more durable and trans-local form of communication, on the other hand, which jointly constitute organizations. However, for the most part, his chapter makes only implicit references to McPhee and Zaug's central article so that it is up to the reader to draw these connections.

In contrast, in the concluding piece (Chapter 7), Putnam and McPhee precisely offer such transversal links by presenting a comparative overview of the five core chapters of the volume (Chapters 2-6). This final chapter outlines avenues for further research in a particularly inspiring manner – prompting researchers to further explore, for instance, the role of spatial configurations or material embodiments for the communicative constitution of organizations. Indeed, first steps in this direction have been made, for example, by Ashcraft et al. (2009).

Overall, this volume presents a fascinating conversation on one of the key questions of CCO thinking, i.e., *how* communication constitutes organizations. Its debate-like structure makes it a relatively accessible starting point for readers, and it represents a must-read for organizational scholars interested in contemporary CCO thinking. Meanwhile, the volume has also triggered important follow-up debates, for instance, in a "special topic forum" of *Management Communication Quarterly* that is dedicated to discussing the book's central implications (e.g., Bixel 2010; Putnam & Nicotera 2010). Interestingly, in a self-referential way, the volume has served as proof for its own theorizations (especially in the case of Taylor's Chapter 6), in that it

represents the textualization of conversations among scholars engaged in discussing the organizations-communication relationship, it has allowed for making these conversations visible beyond space and time, and thus has communicatively contributed to the organizing activities underlying what is known today as CCO.

At the same time, however, the structure of the book is also one of its main shortcomings: chapters 3–6 refer only to McPhee and Zaug’s initial article; other than that, they hardly interconnect. It would have been fascinating to learn more about how Cooren and Fairhurst or Taylor assess the extensions and variations of the “four-flows” model that McPhee and Iverson and Browning et al. discuss in their respective chapters, or how McPhee and Zaug might have responded to the criticisms of Cooren and Fairhurst, in particular. Furthermore, while reading the volume, one notices fundamental conceptual differences between the various contributors that are never spelled out explicitly in the book. For instance, McPhee and Iverson draw on Giddens’s notion of agency as the “capacity to think about actions and to consider consequences as well as the capacity to act otherwise” (p. 60) – a definition that presupposes the human agent in his or her capability to think about and weigh consequences and alternatives. In contrast, Cooren and Fairhurst put forth a much broader notion of agency (interestingly, also by referring to and reinterpreting Giddens 1984): they define agency as the capability “to make a difference” (p. 131), which in principle could also apply to non-human entities. A final point is that this volume is based on a somewhat narrow notion of the CCO perspective. More recent publications have delineated the CCO view as a much broader theoretical endeavor, acknowledging, for instance, also “implicit” strains of CCO thinking (Ashcraft et al. 2009) and pointing out the similarities between the CCO view and Luhmann’s (1995) theory of social systems (see Cooren et al. 2011; Schoeneborn forthcoming).

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