

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

seeking to decenter ownership nor with collectives that do not have clear ownership, such as nonprofit organizations and voluntary associations (Frumkin, 2002).

In informal discourse, the notion of agency rightly means the capacity to communicate or act so as to have an effect. Scholars discussing agency often argue that agents, deserving of full normal agency, instead are empowered only with partial agency, a complex notion that involves ideas reflecting some challenges constraining or slanting agency. These include material, social, and personal conditions. We provide a more detailed discussion in Chapter 2.

To mention cardinal concrete cases, people concerned about the environmental crisis or various dimensions of social injustice will recognize, with chagrin, the variety and impact of these limitations on agency that plague their own work as well as the others they seek to help. Communication—itself an action that is plagued by challenges—is still key in embodying, and dialectically in overcoming, these challenges, and thus in invigorating and transforming agency. In each case, analysis of such obstacles must be based on the model of the individual agent, to avoid muddling its relevance to people striving to act, and to avoid analysis at the level of social units (e.g., organizations) that are, inescapably, comprised of agents facing varied arrays of agency challenges in the organizational context. In addition, speaking of more or less agency is blatantly oversimplified when, as soon as one type of challenge to agency is overcome, another takes its place. All of the challenges are appropriate concerns of critical scholars, who have indeed devoted a good deal of study to them.

Twentieth-century social and communication theorists had somewhat different concerns about agency: whether unintended behaviors (unconscious, or issuing from distorted consciousness or an unintended result of an intended act) was truly action, by a valid agent. ST, as Giddens (1976a, 1976b, 1979, 1984) argues for it, responds to these challenges with a bedrock account of agency as based on “three overarching concepts: *the power to make a difference by appropriating structural resources (the capacity to act otherwise), knowledgeability, and reflexive monitoring*, which includes rationalization of action” (Iverson et al., 2018, p. 44; emphasis in original). We elucidate this core conception in later chapters.

We distinguish our definition of agency from the actor–network notion of actants, which bunches together humans and groups with material objects, environmental system components, psychological phenomena such as attitudes, and other nonhuman entities. ST’s conception reveals the error of lumping everything together under the ontological label of actants, especially if theorists must, in the next breath, declare as Cooren (in Schoeneborn et al., 2014, pp. 299–300) does,

... the human actor is an obligatory passage point in everything I have been talking about so far. If a logo communicates something in the name of an organization, it is not only because its designers might have meant it that way (sometimes, they can miss the point) but also because someone is able to make it say something when he or she sees it. ...The organizational world is...a world where humans play a key role, to

the extent that they are the ones who mobilize or “ventriloquize” texts, values, and facts in their discourse. (We must note that he goes on to state: “...humans are not only ventriloquists, in that they make, for instance, policies say something in specific circumstances but also ventriloquized [by other actants], in that these policies lead them to say specific things and not other things. There is no absolute starting point....”)

The materiality facet of this issue is explained later, but the key to agency is that it is grounded in *human* practices and the capacity of humans to articulate and change what are fundamentally human social systems. This approach focuses on the meanings of actions and the ability to process the meaningfulness of organizations from a communication perspective. That said, we argue that agency in relationship to organizing answers the question, “Is it an organization if humans are removed from the equation?” From a communication perspective, we would contend the answer is a resounding no. While systems certainly function in nature, in outer space, we contend that organizations are constituted from communication processes that fundamentally require human interaction as part of the process.

1.3 Materiality and Sociomateriality of Communication and Organizations

In short: The novel terms *materiality* and *sociomateriality* actually evoke ideas from systems communication science of the 1960s or before, of mathematically-analyzable information and communication as patterned matter-energy (Berlo, 1960; Shannon & Weaver, 1949). These were developed as alternatives to various schools of mainstream sociological and psychological theories of organizational, and indeed of all communication. The emphasis on these terms, especially sociomateriality, derives from the observation that mainstream theories often overlook the *things* relevant to communication, preferring to elaborate on the personality characteristics, attitudes, linguistic and interactive patterns, and relational types manifest in communication. Orlikowski, the originating scholar of the important theory-complex surrounding sociomateriality argues that we should not separate *the material* and *the social* as different essences, but instead should study contingent sociomaterial constitutive intertwinings of agencies. Our grounding in ST—one of the communication-theoretic wellsprings from which some sociomateriality scholars, including Orlikowski, LaTour, Cooren, and Kuhn draw leads us to several responses.

For one thing, we are not forced to use the label *material agency* because we have a long-lived and rich conceptual scheme available, organized around the term *causation*. It is commonplace, for instance, to say that using the instrument *hammer* causes a nail to pierce boards and cause them to stay in place, not that the hammer or nail has agency that leads to such effects. We need not ignore the causal powers of material phenomena like viruses, hurricanes, steering wheels, computers, or paintbrushes, nor the *statistical-interactive* impacts of genes and

environment on personality, when we abstain from calling them agents; nor do we have to downplay or oversimplify their significance in our explanations of organizational phenomena. Many sociomateriality theorists advocate a well-defined sort of theory termed *practice theory*—but in fact, ST already is one! It is a sophisticated one, able to contain the dual ideas of strong human agency and decentering of agency in favor of practice (as we explain in later chapters).

We do seek, in concert with the theorists of sociomateriality, to avoid divisions of sociomaterial entities that reduce everything into humans vs. everything else. Noteworthy is that sociomaterial has embedded in it such a division, connoting the special status they often must give to human-interactive phenomena. That same observation runs through much of the sociomateriality literature: for instance, one of its central concepts, *affordance*, primordially means feature allowing manipulation or access by humans. A cardinal example involving affordance is a tool, manipulated to accomplish some further task, and about which humans can have tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966).

We think that a finer segmentation is preferable, into, say, simple objects vs. tools (with affordances) vs. self-reproducing entities like genes or viruses vs. automata like thermostats vs. informed entities (Zuboff, 1988) like computers, vs. insensate living beings (that cannot feel pain or frustration—arguably plants) vs. sensate beings vs. their specific subcategory humans, vs. social relations/collectivities including organizations, vs. more englobing conditions like modernity (Giddens, 1990) or weather/climate. Systems theorists strive to articulate lists like this, detailing levels of complexity entities can attain. However, for our money, the crucial list of social-material concepts is implicitly enunciated in standard ST. ST conceives agents with powers like reflexive self-understanding, rationalization, and discursive penetration, all of which enable them to engage in practices (explicitated in later chapters). Then the crucial distinctions for theory focus on agents vs. practice vs. resources for action vs. constraints on action vs. contexts of action vs. conditions circumscribing action (McPhee & Iverson, 2009). Preserving the unique status of empowered human agents affirms the importance of ideas like meaning-in-context, value, significance, identity, and voice, for explanations of organizational (or any) communication (which thus is not equivalent to a causal chain of material signals or nonhuman agents).

However, we must add one final caveat about how ST relates to materiality/sociomateriality scholarship. Theory and research inspired by the interwoven-practice notion of materiality tend to underemphasize the historical-materialist insights of critical theory, especially the idea (Bleich, 2013) that language, and communication in practice, are both unequally available, unequally mastered, and in general help to create the whole range of obstacle to agency detailed just earlier. For instance, studies of affordances—mediating support for using—ICT generally ignore the fact that, for most of humanity, adequate ICT—and adequate living conditions of many sorts—are *unaffordable*—a fact that should roil the discourse of materialist social and communication scholars, as it does the insights of interpretive/deconstructive scholars.

1.4 Power/Domination

As well displayed in the accounts just earlier, critical scholarship has found fertile ground in the webs of ideas centered on the terms agency and materiality. Our overviews of those ideas, based in ST, already showed how structuration and 4F ideas might have unique value for critical, and all, organizational research. But our third key issue—power/domination—has a special affinity for that work. Like a city, an organization has “storage capacity (involving) time-space distanciation and the generation of power,... It is a special kind of container, a crucible for the generation of power” (Giddens, 1981, p. 95, 96) and 4F theory articulates the fact that power flows through organizations in more than one way.

To introduce the discussion elaborated in later chapters, Giddens’ ideas regarding power are crucially tied to one of his most core ideas—resources, or structural resources. *Structural resources*, in his formulation, are comprised of two analytically separate and apparently distinct, subcategories, all of which are focal in critical theory. One is allocative resources—forms of transformative capacity—power to make a difference—generating command over objects, goods, or material phenomena. The other is authoritative resources—transformative capacities “generating command over persons and actors” (Giddens, 1984, p. 33). However, blatantly obviously, an allocative resource such as a meal from a famous chef often requires mediation by supportive personnel (subordinate chefs, waiters, etc.) via the agent’s authoritative capacity. Equally obviously, those supportive personnel draw upon material resources like cookware and chopped onions. So to discuss: “command over...material phenomena” we must discuss not just raw supplies plus tools or other instrumental media, but the command over supportive personnel involved. Contrariwise, command over persons and actors is dicier. Take, for example, a manager of a work department. This *authoritative-resource* holder has to work, with variable success, to:

- induce the commitment of new, as well as old, subordinates and co-managers, plus even improve the quality of their efforts, plus induce persons of higher authority to provide support.
- maintain an acceptable and workable degree of goal clarity and system integrity (an impression of what their department does, of how they do it, of whether they do it right and legally, of how their department fits in, and of whether it achieves some level of good outcomes for everyone involved—but especially the bosses).
- achieve locally adapted, departmentally coordinated, and successful communicative and other work (not just an impression, but actually collaborate to deliver the goods).
- balance their identity (i.e., relatedness to their legitimate work organization) with their and their subordinates’ attention to outside contributions and challenges.

Yes, these needs (overlapping, admittedly, the list of challenges to agency given in chapter two) intentionally correspond roughly to our 4F. But they, equally, reveal how agency is fundamentally linked to the critical-theoretic concepts that occupy the heart of ST, such as the power dialectic practice-based vs. merely utilitarian agency, and the discourse of self-identity, explained in later chapters.

Those basic issues will reappear throughout the book. But we now turn to explicate the central theory referenced in the discussion earlier—ST.