

COMMENTARY

Beyond explicit communication involved in the critical communication perspective

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The critical communication perspective and the encapsulated communicative constitution of organization (CCO) model described by Mumby (2019) offer a dynamic framework by which to examine workplace exchanges at the individual and group level. Moreover, I see utility in this perspective as a framework for interesting multidisciplinary research involving organizational psychology. The author defines this perspective as “the process of creating and negotiating collective, coordinated systems of meaning through symbolic practices oriented toward the achievement of organizational goals” (Mumby & Kuhn, 2019, p. 11). However, as useful as this framework may be, I believe the critical communication perspective is incomplete in its definition of the processes involved in creating and negotiating collective, coordinated systems of meaning.

Mumby (2019) describes organizations as political sites of contestation wherein the communicative construction of collective systems of meaning does not occur spontaneously or capriciously. This characterization seems to assume only explicit communication between rational stakeholders. The subsequent examples provided by the author, even the more complex ones concerning multiple stakeholders in the organization, do seem to support this assumption. In other words, the critical communication perspective seems to be predicated on explicit communicative exchanges and foregoes tacit social exchanges and psychological underpinnings of organizational contestation that are more or less spontaneous.

The exclusion of tacit exchanges and psychological underpinnings may seem like a practical omission to critical management studies (CMS) scholars interested in the problematization of worker resistance to managerial control processes. After all, explicit exchanges between stakeholders give scholars concrete scenarios with which to examine and pose real-world practical solutions. However, I believe the examination of psychological processes that engender a stakeholder’s sense of self-efficacy, self-identity, and sense of belongingness, all touched upon by Mumby (2019), will be serviceable to a greater understanding of tacit organizational contestation, communication, and worker resistance to managerial control. Furthermore, understanding psychological underpinnings of the communicative process may help to explain changes in workplace trends of interest to communication scholars and perhaps even somewhat ameliorate troubling aspects of said trends.

For example, although I accept the author’s proposition that there is essentially something broken in the workplace today, or perhaps many broken things, I do not totally regard the increased influence of the workplace on one’s self-identity as a function of oppressive corporate colonization. Instead, I more so see this trend as the product of psychological ownership (PO) naturally manifesting in the workforce. Psychological ownership can conceptually be defined as the state in which an individual identifies a target for ownership as “mine” (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2003). The literature on PO recognizes three sociobiological motives for human psychological ownership: efficacy and effectance, self-identity, and sense of belongingness. Do these three sociobiological motives sound familiar? Another trend identified by Mumby (2019) is the growing field of high

knowledge workers, otherwise termed as “no-collar workers,” with flexible but highly demanding work schedules. Through the lens of PO, this trend also partly accounts for the increased influence of the workplace on one’s self-identity and is a more precise explanation for the increased influence of the workplace on one’s self-identity than oppressive corporate colonization. Scholars examining PO have posed that the more knowledge one amasses and the more one toils to gain expertise (high knowledge workers), the more likely a sense of felt ownership is to emerge (Pierce, Kostova, & Dirks, 2001). Other research suggests that individuals will broadly tend to feel ownership over a target that they gain knowledge about (Beggan & Brown, 1994).

PO is just one of the many potential psychological factors that can play a role in tacit exchanges between stakeholders in an organization. Imagine key stakeholders (managers and employees) in an organization struggling over the meaning of access to specific workplace resources without factoring in the felt ownership employees have over said resources. The resulting compromise, or lack of one, would be calculated from the managerial side without a full appreciation of the leverage that the managers could gain or the humanity involved in appeasing intuitive and powerful feelings of ownership. The critical communication perspective is a dynamic framework by which to investigate organizational processes and pose solutions to exchanges of worker–managerial contestation. However, the scope of the critical communication perspective should expand into more of a multidisciplinary framework wherein explicit and tacit exchanges between stakeholders are calculated.

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