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CONTENTS

Power: a neglected concept in organizational communication

Some researchers of organizational communication have stressed that 'organizational communication' is either a discipline without a domain or a collection of empirical generalizations without a theoretical foundation.[1] Although Redding notes that "the field is characterized by great numbers of entities that could be called 'theories'", he stressed that "the preponderance of so-called theories in organizational communication are best understood as derivatives of certain ideologies." Certainly, these ideologies represent either the beliefs or the organizational theories of various researchers.

The primary concern of this paper is to show the role of certain ideologies in constructing organizational power relationships. Power is viewed here as a reflection of a formal ideology that influences communication in organizations. Power is used in this paper not only to refer to power of person A over person B in order to have B perform some task, something he/she would not have done otherwise,[2] but is also extended to include organizational power supported and sustained by a hierarchy of authority, a system of division of labour, and an ideological framework. As Schurmann observes, "one of the most important expressions of ideology in action is as a communication system in organization. Organizations cannot function without a constant flow of information. . . . Ideology, as a systematic set of ideas, provides the basic elements of the communication system."[3] Considering information as power, representatives of official ideologies control it, monopolize it and sometimes even distort it in order to serve certain goals and objectives.

There is, in fact, no research which examines thoroughly the impact of ideology on communication process in organizations. As a result, the dominant perspective in this discipline is the inductive method which is based mainly on a psychological approach which concentrates on researching individual or/and small groups' communication. This approach has introduced more than one serious bias into organizational communication studies because they ignore, for example, the political

nature of organizations.[4] This neglect of the political nature of organizations was a consequence of the individual-centered approach followed by many researchers of organizational communication. This bias known as the "psychological bias" in communication studies, was a result of ignoring – until recently – the social structural variables, and the transactional and relational nature of human communication.[5] Recently several researchers, such as Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo and Putnam, have stressed the importance of using the organizational culture approach in studying communication in the organization.[6]

The concept of power, in fact, was neglected in psychological studies because it was not considered to be a psychological problem requiring study.[7] In sociological studies, however, power is studied as a part of Marxism and political theories in general. Olsen maintains that "whereas most political philosophers prior to Marx have usually linked power to the state, Marx claimed instead that power originates mainly in economic production, that it influences all aspects of society, that the principle wielders of social power are social classes, and the government is essentially a servant of the dominant social class."[8] Marx did not treat the issue of power when it concerned the state as the owner of the means of production. In fact, Marx never studied state capitalism per se.[9] Although Marx did not elaborate a general power theory of social organization, he did demonstrate the relevance of such a theory in understanding human society.[10] Whenever the state is the owner of the means of production the principle wielders of organizational power are the techno-bureaucrats who represent the state.

Although Marxists suggest that the organizational hierarchy of authority is the main source of alienation, conflict and frustration, Weberians consider the centralized hierarchy of power to be the most efficient and rational form of social organization. Numerous writings, however, have examined power decentralization and polyarchy instead of centralization and hierarchy.[12] Centralized authority implies a rigid decision-making structure whereas decentralization provides the subordinates with greater flexibility in making decisions.[13] Centralization and decentralization of decision making are subsequently treated in this study as two important elements which shape organizational power relationships.

The failure of the Scientific Management School to solve the managerial problems in capitalist enterprises and the failure of Russian Socialism to provide a practical and effective managerial model have led to the evolution of new models and patterns of management, such as the Yugoslav self-management system and the human relationists' participative management systems. These new systems were developed in order to involve workers in the decision making process. However,

some forms of workers' participation do no more than sugarcoat, and therein disguise, the bitter conflicts inherent in the hierarchy of organizational authority.[14]

The failure of Marxists to provide any significant contribution to social science in general and to organizational theory in particular has been well documented by both Baran and Sweezy and Braverman.[15] The latter criticizes the attitude of many Marxists. He notes that

> . . . the technology of capitalism, which Marx had treated with cautious reserve, and the organization and administration, which he had treated with passionate hostility, became relatively acceptable. Now the revolution against capitalism was increasingly conceived as a matter of stripping from the highly productive capitalist mechanism certain "excrescences", improving the conditions of work, adding to the factory organization a formal structure of "workers' control" and replacing the capitalist mechanisms of accumulation and distribution with socialist planning.

Most organizational communication researchers treat organization as a unitary system which is characterized by co-operation and harmony. This approach neglects the role of power and conflict of interest as important factors in organizational behaviour. This argument is supported by Tannenbaum who states that "'the human relations approach that inspired a great deal of research in organizations avoided explicit reference to social power or control, partly because these terms carried connotations that were inconsistent with the ideal of the harmonious, conflict-free organization."[16]

In fact, the above position of organizational communication researchers is a result of adopting an ideological framework within the functionalist paradigm. As a rule, the functionalists ignore the question of organizational power preferring to use such terms as authority, control and leadership instead of power and conflict of interests in order to describe the managerial prerogative of guiding the organization toward achieving common goals. Nevertheless, a few researchers' studies, such as Tannenbaum, have paid some attention to power and organizational hierarchies, others to conflict.[17] However, these studies are mostly descriptive. The pluralist position considers power as a variable, crucial to the understanding of an organisation's activities. Power is considered by this position as "the medium through which conflicts of interests are alleviated and resolved. The organization is viewed as a plurality of power holders drawing their power from a plurality of sources".[18]

A common argument between functionalists and pluralists is centered around the question of whether organizational power is a zero-sum phenomenon or not. This argument springs primarily from

the great conflict which exists at the ideological level between the holders of a unitary or a pluralist view of organization concerning the use of such terms as power, conflict of interests and authority. The holders of the pluralist view look to 'power' as a zero-sum variable, which implies that any increase in subordinates' power would necessitate a decrease in the superior's power and vice versa.[19] However, the functionalists, in general, refute this position arguing that power is a non zero-sum phenomenon. Tannenbaum for example, asserts that the total amount of power in a social system may increase, and leaders and followers may therefore enhance their power jointly.[20] The total amount of power may also decline, and all the parties within the social system may consequently suffer corresponding decreases.

Adhering to the principles of Scientific Management and Human Relations schools, many organizational communication researchers failed to address the role of power in influencing content and patterns of organizational communication. As a result, this position has contributed to maintaining the unequal position of the employees in receiving information. Researchers such as Redding attribute this position to a paternalistic management style that is adopted as an ideology. This ideology was developed by the followers of Scientific Management and Human Relations schools. This ideology assumes, for example, that "the direction of causation between managerial leadership style and employee productivity is from manager to worker, so that 'considerate' supervisory behaviours will be an important cause of high producing employees rather than the other way around".[21] This paternalistic position has influenced the way the organizational communication researchers have viewed communication in the organization. In this regard, Redding maintains that causal relationships between basic premises regarding the organization and communication concepts per se have been established by researchers such as Rogers and Rogers and Farace, Monge, and Russell.[22]

The way the human relationists have approached organizational issues such as participation in decision making, conflict, authority and supervision has influenced their concept of communication in the organization. This influence is summarized in the following points:

1. The restriction of subordinates' participation to certain insignificant organizational issues means depriving them of information concerning important issues

2. The ability of managers to control and manipulate the extent to which workers have access to information allows these managers to structure both the expectations of the subordinates and the premises for making decisions.[23]

3. Viewing chain of command as the primary channel of communication in the organization implies that the content of downward

communication must differ from the content of upward communication.

Bendix comments that:[24]

> What workers say is called information which management can use to 'eliminate misunderstanding'. But what employers tell their employees are the facts . . . , which 'will promote teamwork, cooperation, communication and harmony'. Thus, in the words used to describe 'two-way' communication, subordinates are expected to listen so they may learn, while managers merely receive information which they can use.

Through neglecting these questions the employers and managers were able to partially adopt the human relations philosophy as an appropriate facade. This partial adoption was enough for managers to look considerate, cooperative, and democratic while serving their own interests. Evidently such interests cannot be served better if the workers are given equal opportunity for access to sources of information.

Finally, although the human relationists recognize the role of informal groups in spreading rumours and exchanging information, they failed to conceive the activity of these groups as a reflection of an aspect of the organizational power struggle. The main reason for this struggle is monopolization of the economic power combined with monopolization of information. Monopolization of power by top managers leads various organizational groups, especially those at lower levels, to seek information from informal sources.

In short, organizational power relationships define to a great extent the patterns and content of communication in an organization. Since organizational power relationships cannot be studied outside of an ideological framework, more effort is needed in studying the ideological frameworks and organizational power relationships as a theoretical basis for this new descipline.

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Notes

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