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Professionalising organisational communication discourses, materialities and trends

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As a field, organisational communication began because of a confluence of national and global events. These events included military training needs and changing labour force requirements and interests, as well as growing appreciation for how communication enables particular processes and outcomes and how communication constitutes realities locally and globally (see Ashcraft, Kuhn and Cooren 2009; Axley 1984; Redding 1972, 1985; Jablin and Putnam 2001; Jablin et al. 1987; Putnam and Nicotera 2009; Tompkins and Redding 1988). Scholars conceptualised organisational communication in various ways. Organisational communication has been positioned as both antecedent and effect, clusters of metaphorical schema and problematics, and as the process through which organisation itself is constituted and performed (see Corman and Poole 2000; Mumby and Stohl 1996; Putnam and Nicotera 2009; Putnam and Boys 2006; Robichaud and Cooren 2012). Shared by but different in organisational and professional communication, this constitutive approach centred on discourse and text offers value in current and emerging trends in research and practice.

In taking the constitutive approach to communication, Kuhn (2012) describes what this lens means in scholarship and practice. To Kuhn, taking communication seriously means 'portraying communication as constitutive of social realities' with a focus on the production of meanings in social action; 'seeing organizations not as containers for communication, not merely settings inside of which communication occurs, but intrinsically as communication'; 'staying in the realm of communicational events both conceptually and methodologically' with mindfulness that communication is always contextually, politically and materially situated; and 'eradicating simplistic assumptions about meaning convergence as the telos of communication' while embracing the ambiguities, contradictions, and logics of difference in which order and disorder co-influence each other and operate as significant analytical frames (pp. 548-50). This constitutive nature of communication underlies both organisational and professional communication with the former examining a broader range of phenomena about diverse collectivities on micro through macro levels and in private-public realms, and the latter studying specific professional exigencies and findings that correspond with understandings about, or more effective, practices in professions. Organisational communication scholars increasingly have expressed interest in the nature, expectations surrounding, and meanings/meaningfulness of particular types of work (e.g. Barley, Leonardi and Bailey 2012; Buzzanell and Lucas 2013; Cheney et al. 2008; Gabor 2011; Kisselburgh, Berkelaar and Buzzanell 2009) and of being professional in local and global contexts (Cheney and Ashcraft 2007; Ellingson 2011; Lammers and Garcia 2009; Meisenbach 2008). They have not delved as deeply into the discursive and material practices that create and sustain professions and professionals through documents, logics and arguments, and identity formations through text development, reports, websites and other discourses and materialities. Similarly, professional communication researchers have delved into how professionals understand their communities of practice, how materials are generated for organisational goals, and where there can be greater academician-practitioner collaborations (Cheng and Kong 2009). For professional communication scholars, texts are contested sites for training and for informing practitioners about daily practices. Power and agency are significant considerations insofar as accreditations, certifications, policies, reports and other texts have profound consequences. Inattention to political dynamics, cultural underpinnings, and document specifications can affect professions' (de)legitimisation and (de)institutionalisation. In sum, organisational and professional communication have distinctive orientations. Yet both attend to intersections between discourse and materialities, as well as theory and practice; both examine power, authority and agency.

Because our chapter discusses organisational communication for scholars in professional communication, we organise our chapter (a) by providing overviews of organisational communication from the earliest reviews to current reframings (Part I); (b) by noting recent inquiry can contribute to professional communication (Part II); and (c) by encouraging emerging research trends that underlie organisational-professional communication intersections (Part III). In Part I, we incorporate different levels – individual and interactional (micro) through organisational or institutional (meso), and societal, cultural, and global (macro discourses) – and varied organisational contexts in which professional might have different meanings. Furthermore, we highlight diverse metatheoretical traditions, communication theories, and methodologies (for overviews, see Carbaugh and Buzzanell 2010; Craig 1999; May and Mumby 2005; Putnam and Mumby 2014). We integrate some classic materials as springboards for later discussion. We note key scholars' research programs, acknowledging that our limited depth and breadth does not do justice to their work and to the many others who have contributed greatly to organisational communication.

In Part II, we utilise several decision criteria to focus on current organisational communication research that can inform and be informed by professional communication. Here we use particular conceptualisations. For organisational communication, Mumby (2007) notes that 'in simple terms' such scholars investigate:

the dynamic relationships between communication processes and human organizing. Communication is conceived as foundational to, and constitutive of, organizations, while organizations are viewed as relatively enduring structures that are both medium and outcome of communication processes. While research has focused traditionally on corporate organizational forms, recently the field has broadened its scope to study nonprofit and alternative organizations.

(2007: 3290)

In contrast, the IEEE (2013) delimits professional communication as 'include[ing] the study, preparation, production, delivery, use, improvement, and promotion of human communication in all media in engineering and other technical and professional environments'. Bhatia (2010) enlarges the scope of professional communication by focusing on text and context:

The interesting thing about professional communication is that what you see as the ultimate product is the text, which is made possible by a combination of very complex and dynamic range of resources, including those that in linguistic and earlier discourse analytical literature are viewed as lexico-grammatical, rhetorical and organizational. Other contributors to the construction of professional artefacts are conventions of the genre in question, the understanding of the professional practice in which the genre is embedded, and the culture of the profession, discipline or institution, which constrains the use of textual resources for a particular discursive practice. In other words, any instance of professional communication simultaneously operates and can be analysed at these four levels, as text, as representation of genre, as realization of professional practice, and as expectation of professional culture.

(2010: 33)

In keeping these definitions in mind, we focus primarily on empirical research that has been conducted within the last decade, noting trends and pragmatic implications. We use this overview to generate areas of interest for both organisational and professional communication scholars and practitioners in Part III, Emerging research directions.

Part I: Overview of organisational communication

In this section, we overview the conceptual, empirical and methodological landscape of organisational communication. From its very beginnings and continuing today, organisational communication has been interdisciplinary – drawing from organisational sociology, administrative science, management, industrial/organisational psychology, organisational behaviour and human resources, and training and development, amongst others – grounded in practice as well as theory, and diverse in terms of methodologies (see Barnett and Thayer 1988; Buzzanell and Stohl 1999; Farace, Monge and Russell 1977; Goldhaber and Barnett 1988; Jablin *et al.* 1987; Redding 1985; Tompkins and Redding 1988). This diversity is evident in the various ways in which scholars have reviewed the field and have noted trends at different points in time.

For instance, in early reviews, organisational communication was organised by traditions, such as Putnam and Cheney's (1985) communication channels and climate, organisational networks and superior-subordinate communication, that were grounded in social science and oriented more toward communication as essential in more effective, efficient and satisfying workplaces consistent with managerialist concerns. With Putnam and Paconowky's (1983) Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach, emphases shifted toward linguistic and performative turns, questioning how organisation members make sense of, express, and work through the politics and practices of their everyday lives. With the interpretive turn also came attention to critical, feminist, postmodern, and postcolonialist means of understanding organisational life and organising processes (e.g. Ashcraft and Mumby 2004; Broadfoot and Munshi 2007; Buzzanell 1994, 2000; Deetz 1992; Mumby 1988; Pal and Buzzanell 2013) as well as greater attention to difference (e.g. Ashcraft and Allen 2003; Mumby 2011). Although much early structuration work had been qualitative, organisational communication scholars also used quantitative and mixed methodological approaches to ask how organisational members were enabled and constrained in their abilities to act and how structures were (re)constructed through human interaction in contexts ranging from seemingly intractable human conflicts to technologies and work-family policies (e.g. Contractor, Monge and Leonardi 2011; DeSanctis and Poole 1994; Haslett 2011; Kirby and Krone 2002; Poole and DeSanctis 1992; Nicotera and Mahon 2013).

In some cases, these materials provided insight into the ways individuals learn about professions and 'doing' professional, mostly through a sideways glance at socialisation experiences, politics and ethical dilemmas, and stories about everyday work life (e.g. Allen 2000; Ashcraft 2000), rather than a direct examination of professionals and professions and of text as the primary site of investigation. More recently, scholars in different fields, including organisational communication, have used computational social science with its emphases on big data and integration of internet and social media to better understand and predict everyday human behaviour and fields (Lazer *et al.* 2009).

Although the sites, methodologies, and research questions have expanded, core issues are ever present in organisational communication. Scholars have sought broader ways to characterise organisational communication. Mumby and Stohl (1996) centred organisational communication's distinctiveness around problematics or underlying concerns of voice, rationality, organisation and organisation-society, problematics that have continued to be critiqued and extended in terms of whose voice, what rationalities, and how organisation are prioritised and afforded or denied legitimacy (Broadfoot and Munshi 2007). Furthermore, Putnam (2012) argued that organisation and organisation-society would continue to be central problematics in organisational communication scholars' pursuit of greater internationalisation, engagement and understanding of the contradictions and complexities in organising.

Within the last decade, these problematics along with increased engagement with social and global issues have been recurring trends in and challenges for organisational communication scholarship. Echoing organisational communication's past and looking toward the future, Jones et al. (2004) encourage pursuit of research responding to several challenges: theoretical and methodological innovation, ethics and macrolevel issues, new organisational structures and technologies, organisational change as well as diversity and intergroup aspects, and importance of voice and multilevel analyses. Seibold et al. (2009) pose new questions about areas that have long traditions in organisational communication - organisational socialisation and assimilation, organisational culture, innovation diffusion and organisational change - and future possibilities for applied communication scholarship and engagement. Most recently, Rooney, McKenna and Barker (2011) traced patterns throughout the history of Management Communication Quarterly through an intellectual structure approach that maps concepts graphically. Their findings not only dovetailed with MCQ editors' assessments of journal content but also with others' trends in organisational communication. Of interest to professional communication researchers and practitioners, Rooney et al. (2011) concluded their computer-assisted text analyses by saying: 'Clearly, the communication "fields" of professional and technical writing, as well as spoken and interpersonal communication, have been jettisoned, allowing the journal to shape its identity more toward an organizational studies centre focused on communication and discourse' (p. 605). Perhaps these fields have been 'jettisoned' but there remain points of convergence for, as Bhatia (2010) notes, professional communication analyses integrate 'textual and intertextual resources, generic conventions, professional practices, and professional cultures in the context of which the other three are invariably embedded' (p. 34).

Part II: Current research directions

Professional cultures and the broader environments in which they are embedded are characterised by risk, economic instabilities, growth of entrepreneurships and fast-paced technological change (Neff 2012). In these environments, workers attempt to fashion flexible but branded selves in face-to-face and mediated contexts, as their identities constantly change to be reflexive and employable (Hearn 2008; Kuhn 2006; Lair, Sullivan and Cheney 2005). Identities are

(re)formed by a complex 'assemblage' of discursive resources that stand at the intersection of the person-organisation-society relationship (Kuhn 2006). Regarding identities, what it means to 'do' professional can be ascertained by current organisational communication research on (a) cybervetting and employer-applicant expectations, (b) requirements to work constantly yet also have career and personal life sustainability; (c) meaning/meaningfulness of work that affords dignity; and (d) discursive approaches to traditional research areas, such as leadership and organisational change management.

First, emerging research on cybervetting and employer-applicant expectations indicates that use of internet and social media has become normative. Cybervetting is the 'process by which organizational representatives [and applicants] use publicly accessible nongovernmental, noninstitutional online tools or sites such as search engines or SNS to gather information about current or prospective employees [and organisations for which they might become members]' (Berkelaar 2010: 18). Through an extractive process available via information and communication technologies (ICTs), individuals gather and use information about others' perceived professionalism, interests, social networks and other details relying on visual, textual and technological cues - noting that it is not simply about deleting 'red flags' because most individuals and organisations need to have an online presence (Berkelaar 2010). For employers, cybervetting is risk work - taking and mitigating risk - as well as reputation management. Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2012) argue that cybervetting entails a 'paradigm shift in how employers communicatively constitute 'the right fit' in contemporary personnel selection ... with practical implications for personnel selection, work, and careers' (2012: 3) as well as professions and what it means to do professional work. Yet, there still are not adequate organisational documents and policies that operate simultaneously to afford adequate transparency, privacy, and network building for career and personal relationships within local and global contexts - research areas fitting within purviews of organisational and professional communication scholars.

Second, organisational communication scholars are delving into work-life balance or, as we refer to the phenomenon, the paradoxical requirements to work constantly yet also have career and personal life sustainability. Researchers have studied how individuals and groups engage in work at offices, through telework and other nonstandard arrangements, and use technology (presumably) to manage tensions between and feel satisfaction with career and home, family, community, and/or leisure (e.g. Edley 2004; Fonner and Roloff 2010; Golden, Kirby and Jorgensen 2006; Golden and Geisler 2007; Hylmö and Buzzanell 2002; Kirby and Buzzanell 2014; Leonardi, Treem and Jackson 2010). According to Gregg (2011) knowledge workers are caught in ever expanding work that they see as necessary given their often precarious positions in today's market economy. They also view work expansion as inevitable given workplace technologies and expectations to keep ahead of fast breaking changes and reputational or brand challenges. Professionals' long work hours actually may result more from their enjoyment of the work itself and the many satisfactions that are derived from work accomplishment. They also may fail to define some activities, such as email, as work itself. What aspects of certain genres, such as email and work-life policies promote such contradictions could be answered in part through organisational and professional communication research.

Third, organisational communication researchers are investigating the meaning and meaningfulness of work and how people construct dignity and career choice (Buzzanell and Lucas 2013). In 2008, Cheney et al. recommended use of communicative approaches and empirical, interpretive, and critical perspectives in this area. They explicated work meaning/meaningfulness by examining an array of concepts (e.g. central life interest, job satisfaction, work-life balance, life satisfaction, perspectives on career, spirituality and the meaning of leisure). Using an

intersubjective approach that acknowledges historical, economic and cultural contexts, Cheney et al. considered basic work perceptions (e.g. unpleasant labour, personal expressions of intrinsic and extrinsic worth, and means to transcendent goals). Scholars have enlarged the boundaries used to define work (e.g. unpaid work; Medved 2007), have argued for inclusion of race and other forms of difference (Parker 2003), and have reframed stigmatised work (Meisenbach 2010) and choice (Buzzanell and Lucas 2013). Moreover, scholars have noted that individuals' search for deeper meanings in their (work) lives are subjugated by dominant discourses – 'secular hegemony' – that regard spirituality as a private experience (Buzzanell and Harter 2006; Harter and Buzzanell 2007). Overall, public and private experiences of spirituality can be studied and blended in ways that enhance the meaning(fulness) of work experiences (Feldner 2006).

Fourth, fresh insights into traditional research areas, such as leadership and organisational change management, have been gained through discursive approaches. From the dominant psychology perspective, leadership ontologically tends to be predispositional, cognitive, and trait-based (Fairhurst 2007, 2008). Thus, leadership has been largely fixed with research exploring individual leaders, situations and/or styles. By contrast, discursive approaches are rooted in social constructionist ontological stances (Barge and Fairhurst 2008) whereby leadership is performed or "brought off" in discourse' (Fairhurst 2007: 5). Leadership is thus a performance, one that happens through the interaction of texts, where communication is primary. Stated differently, 'leadership [is] a lived and experienced *social* activity in which persons-inconversation, action, meaning, and context are dynamically interrelated' (Barge and Fairhurst 2008: 228) with pragmatic applications (Fairhurst 2011).

Besides leadership, organisational communication has witnessed a resurgence of interest in change management, consulting, and organisation development (OD) through discursive approaches (Hearn and Ninan 2003; Jian 2007a, 2007b; Mumby 2005; Seo, Putnam and Bartunek 2004; Tracy 2004). The interest in discursive perspectives can be seen in calls for a 'new OD' that emphasises dialogic processes (Bushe and Marshak 2009). Dialogic OD recognises that change happens not when consultants diagnose problems and then prescribe courses of action. Rather, change happens when 'people become aware of the variety of stories people have about themselves and each other and understand their own part in creating unproductive patterns of interaction' (2009: 353). Dialogic OD differs from diagnostic perspectives mainly because of the marked shift from positivist and diagnostic traditions, which focus on objective, empirical measurement of 'what's wrong' followed by ways to 'fix' problems. Dialogic OD includes: appreciative inquiry, which discovers what is good and best within an organisation (Cooperrider, Barrett and Srivastva 1995; Preskill and Catsambas 2006); social constructionism, which focuses on how assumptions about organising are created, maintained and transformed through language (Barrett et al. 1995); and narrative, linguistic and discursive turns, which explore how organisational actors make sense of their daily lives and the role that language and contradiction play in the processes (Bisel and Barge 2010; Fyke and Buzzanell, in press; Heracleous and Barrett 2001; Marshak and Grant 2008; Oswick et al. 2005). Overall, organisational communication scholarship and practice can still be regarded as secondary in scholarship and practice in OD, change management and consulting (see Barge 2009). However, the discursive approach combined with examination of online and offline texts through professional communication promises creative insights into change.

Part III: Emerging research directions

In this section, we extend points from the previous section to focus on research directions that are emerging in organisational communication but also have application to professional

communication. Although many trends span micro through macro levels and utilise diverse theoretical and analytic lenses, we discuss two that underlie many topics and that examine discourse and text as well as materialities: communication as constitutive of organising (CCO) and a discursive approach to difference.

First, organisational communication scholars are developing CCO and its implications not only for making communication central in organisation theorising but also for offering unique ways of approaching societal and global challenges. To understand CCO, scholars have reconsidered the role of communication whereby 'meaning is negotiated and productive of thought and action' (Jian, Schmisseur and Fairhurst 2008: 302; see also Putnam 2008). Jian *et al.* (2008) argue that communication is the 'doing' while discourse is the 'done'.

From a CCO perspective, organisations are recognised as discursive constructions (Fairhurst and Putnam 2004) where different messages and interaction processes constitute the organisation (McPhee and Zaug 2009). For McPhee and Zaug, organisations must develop and maintain relations to at least four 'audiences': members through membership negotiation; themselves through control and self-structuring; internal groups and subgroups through coordinated activity; and external stakeholders through institutional positioning. Communication is a necessary but insufficient condition for organising to actually occur (Bisel 2010). However, an overemphasis on communication as the constitutive element can fail to account for other elements such as the material, spatial and temporal aspects of organising (Reed 2010). Cooren and Fairhurst (2009; see also Haslett 2012) have extended McPhee and Zaug's model by suggesting how researchers can 'scale up' from the micro (i.e. local interactions) to the macro (i.e. structures, rules) and consider both as constitutive of organising. They attend to the interplay of human and non-human actors as agents of organising, as evidenced by burgeoning work on materialities.

Central to the materialities literature is the belief that since the linguistic turn in organisation studies (in the early 1980s), matter has taken a backseat to the role of language in scholars' understanding of organisational processes. Interested in overcoming the duality of language and matter, scholars have explored multimodality, materiality and linguistic resources in organisational life. The myriad non-human elements involved in organising can be categorised in several ways, but we focus here on Ashcraft et al.'s (2009) objects, sites and bodies. This three-part typology provides an entrée for future research to bridge material and discursive realities and professional and organisational communication. Research under the heading of objects investigates the material and ideational qualities of organisational documents and texts such as memos, titles, work orders and signs (Ashcraft et al. 2009; Cooren 2004). Cooren (2004) shows that non-human actors (e.g. memos, reports, signs) have the ability to inform (e.g. memos inform office personnel about important events), deny (e.g. reports deny an organisation's participation in an act), and indicate (e.g. a sign that warns of a security system and cameras on the premises). Using actor network theory, Brummans, Cooren and Chaput (2009) show how anyone or anything that makes a difference in a configuration or network is considered an agent. How agents become present and have agency in particular ways are issues explicated through examination of talk during meetings.

Besides objects, sites bridge material-discursive realities. Sites supply the infrastructure requisite for communication and organising; communication likewise affects the infrastructure, in a constitutive fashion (e.g. office layout). Barley et al. (2012) and Leonardi (2011) discuss how disciplinary sites and material objects in collaborations affect the logic of arguments and resolution of engineering design and innovation considerations (for discussion of communication in engineering design presentations, see Buzzanell and Zoltowski, in press). Finally, recent work considering bodies recognises that communication is an embodied process and that the physical

body can be altered as a result of communication (e.g. for embodiment and institutionalisation of occupation and profession, including stigmatised work; see Ellingson 2011; Gabor 2011; Lammers and Garcia 2009). In short, new and productive intersections between, and unique contributions of, organisational and professional communication can be made visible through the CCO lens (e.g. Robichaud and Cooren 2012).

Second, a discursive approach to difference underscores the complex, nuanced, and contradictory ways in which individuals and collectivities make sense of and create documents, including policies, that privilege and marginalise, include and exclude. Difference does not mean simply representational diversity in workplaces but also the occupational and institutional ways in which membership, logics, priorities and pathways to innovation are determined (e.g. multidisciplinary collaborations; see Leonardi 2011). Furthermore, issues of diversity and inclusion result from both the realities of an ever-shrinking world and intentional attempts to create more representative and equal workplaces. For many industrialised countries, immigration and workplace migration have led to a more international workforce. With increased diversity come challenges in terms of aging workforce, glass ceilings, wage disparities, disciplinary knowledge, and differences in cultures, amongst other issues (e.g., Shen et al. 2009). Organisational communication scholars urge critical and in-depth treatment of these issues, 'in a sustained and coherent manner' with attention to political consequences (Mumby 2011: ix; Allen 2011; Zanoni et al. 2010). Their focus on the ways difference is constituted communicatively offers insight into the everyday construction of difference through dialectics of privilege and marginalisation and through identity construction.

Difference is a consequence of organisational practices and interpersonal interactions rather than a precondition for these social processes (Mumby 2011). Identity, in this perspective, relates to difference as the flipside of a piece of paper; whereas identity usually denotes stability and regularity it cannot, in practice, arise independently of dynamics of differentiation and variation. The identity of one individual or group appears in and through the relational differences from other individuals and groups, and difference, similarly, cannot be considered without having recourse to the identities which it relates. Put otherwise, difference becomes constitutive of identity; it is 'both the mechanism through which meanings and identities are organized and the product – intended or unintended – of everyday organizing and collective sensemaking' (Mumby 2011: ix).

Using a discursive lens means, first, that difference is constructed at micro through macrolevels in varied ways, including but not limited to gender, age, nationality, race and occupations, and with a look inward as well as toward others. Second, the indeterminacy of difference is premised upon a move to seeing differences as the outcomes of dynamic processes that are, in turn, constitutive of identities. This understanding of difference provides a more fruitful starting point for researchers as well as practitioners who are interested in promoting the management and practice of diversity.

Specifically, organisations have created diversity strategies and management policies, but they remain controversial (Zanoni and Janssens 2003). This is in part because they transcend traditional organisational (public) boundaries into private realms. Diversity management practices – such as diversity sensitivity training, work/family balance policies, and recruitment and hiring strategies – are the places where private matters (e.g. gender) meet public performance in paradoxical ways (Remke and Nøholm Just 2013). Similarly creativity thrives on difference in expertise, background, class and other identity aspects but collaborating and innovating remain difficult (Leonardi 2011). In examining discursive-material processes of difference, organisational and professional communication specialists may understand and document more fully the inclusionary practices and complexities of human organising.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we begin by providing an overview of organisational communication then note several trends in its research and practice: cybervetting, career and personal life sustainability; meaning/meaningfulness and dignity of work, and discursive approaches to leadership and organisational change management. We conclude with emerging research directions. Specifically the communication as constitutive of organising (CCO) and difference frameworks hold promise for fully realising the importance of organisational communication approaches and of productive linkages with professional communication.

Related topics

organisational communication; management communication, corporate communication, professional communication; discourse variation in professional communities

Key readings

- Cheney, G. and Ashcraft, K. (2007). 'Considering "the professional" in communication studies: Implications for theory and research within and beyond the boundaries of organizational communication', Communication Theory, 17, 146–75. (This article discusses 'professional' as a contested term whose meanings and materialities lay at the intersections of organisational, health, rhetorical, critical-cultural, interpersonal and legal communication.)
- Ellingson, L. (2010). 'The poetics of professionalism among dialysis technicians', *Health Communication*, 1–12. (This essay integrates several different ways of knowing. The author describes discursive, embodied and material constructions of professional identity and professional communication in health care contexts.)
- Kong, K. (2013). Handbook of Professional Communication, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (This Handbook defines and provides an agenda for future research in professional communication. It can function as a source for ways to conduct different kinds of professional discourse research.)
- Lammers, J. and Garcia, M. (2009). 'Exploring the concept of "profession" for organizational communication research: Institutional influences in a veterinary organization', *Management Communication Quarterly*, 22, 357–84. (This article maintains that 'profession' often is used uncritically by researchers but the disparate aspects knowledge, self-management, internal motivation, service orientation and participation in knowledge communities beyond the workplace are unified by work.)

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