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Postmodern/Poststructural Approaches

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Postmodern and poststructural approaches to organizational communication are marked by an emphasis on ruptures, disjunctions, tensions, instabilities, and other inconsistencies as a part of everyday organizational life. This emphasis is part of an attempt to question, critique, and often compromise the normalized, mundane power structures that regulate organizational life. By questioning and critiquing, these approaches reveal norms and power structures as contingently constructed with particular interests at play. This contrasts with more traditional assumptions that treat norms and power structures as natural, neutral, and stable constructions.

Poststructural and postmodern approaches to organizational communication find their roots in broader philosophical movements and the “linguistic turn” among organizational communication scholars. The linguistic turn of the 1980s saw an epistemological shift toward qualitative methods for understanding the communication/organization relationship and an ontological shift from the assumption that organizations are stable entities that *contain* communication to the

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assumption that organizations are more flexibly constructed *through* communication (see Putnam and Pacanowsky, 1983). Postmodern and poststructural approaches are two of many perspectives that were made possible by this shift, although there are plenty of others that follow the linguistic turn that do not claim the methods and assumptions of poststructural and postmodern approaches. Although poststructuralism and postmodernism are not synonymous, the two approaches are grounded in the same (Eurocentrically defined) historical moment. Understanding the influence of these philosophical movements on organizational communication approaches requires a broad understanding of the movements themselves.

A broad understanding of poststructuralism and postmodernism

The use of the prefix “post” offers nuance beyond chronology. In the traditional sense, “post” signals something that follows—in these cases, a scholarly or aesthetic approach that comes after structuralism or modernism. While poststructuralism and postmodernism are often understood as a rejection of their predecessors, such an interpretation belies the interdependent nature of these philosophical movements and the ones that precede them. The “post” attached to structuralism and modernism signals both a response and a critique. “Post” movements are not so much absolute rejections of, but extensions born out of the failing of structural and modern attempts to adequately describe the world.

Even though poststructuralism and postmodernism are historically and philosophically connected, they are not interchangeable terms. Although both approaches would reject the notion of absolute definitions, it is helpful to think of postmodernism as a broader movement that has been taken up in both cultural and scholarly life, and poststructuralism as a more specific theoretical project. One might describe postmodernism as a particular way of doing or being that challenges the conventionally accepted notion of universal truths and norms by playing with and embracing alternatives to those truths and norms. Poststructuralism offers a more specific academic project that emerged from the study of language, its uses, and the ways it structures lived experience. Their connection lies in the fact that

poststructural work attempts to describe the ontological groundings that postmodernists assume in their attempts to play with and challenge accepted truths and norms. Thus, one can be both a postmodernist and a poststructuralist, but may lean more toward focusing on the problems of postmodernism (exposing faults in and playing with accepted truths and norms) than on the problems of poststructuralism (describing the ontological grounds of a world created through interaction), or vice versa. The following sections elaborate on each of these in more depth before addressing the implications of these philosophical movements for the study of organizations.

Although any attempt to define postmodernism or poststructuralism is highly contestable, this section offers one perspective on the historical context and their broad application in scholarly and social life. Though partial and not comprehensive, it offers a picture of the broader historical, academic, and cultural postmodern approaches to which postmodern organizational studies are connected. Like any picture, certain subjects are foregrounded, while others are consigned to the background or left out completely. It is worth noting that acknowledging the partiality of the account presented in this entry is itself a demonstration of a postmodern approach. As one gains familiarity with these bodies of theory, the centrality of issues of power becomes evident. For this reason, postmodern and poststructural approaches are often used in the well-established body of critical organizational scholarship. Although a large proportion of postmodern and poststructural theory emphasizes issues of power, and therefore could be described as critical theory, not all critical theory embraces postmodern or poststructural premises. Consequently, even though critical, postmodern, and poststructural theory have much overlap, they are not synonymous.

A broad glance at postmodernism

Understanding postmodernism requires an understanding of modernism—the cultural and intellectual movement to which postmodernism responds and offers critiques. Modernity is most often conceptualized through a Eurocentric perspective that focuses on intellectual and technological shifts associated with the European Enlightenment. Most significantly, the Enlightenment ushered in a scientific

perspective, based on the premise of a highly ordered and unified natural and social world that could be systematically discovered and described (without bias) using scientific approaches. At the time, this was a revolutionary challenge to the religious and mythical explanations of the world that preceded it.

Belief in a highly ordered, unified world that can be objectively known and described is central to understanding modern thinking and approaches to the world, in addition to postmodern approaches that challenge this central premise. Belief in an ordered unified world carries with it several corollary assumptions that are also challenged by postmodern approaches. Modern approaches to knowledge:

- assume a split between the knower and the things the knower purports to know—often referred to as the subject (the knower) and the object (the known)—in which the two are thought to exist independent of one another;
- privilege the perspective of the objective scientist, creating a hierarchy of knowledge in which knowledge based on claimed objectivity (via the scientific method) is deemed superior to knowledge formed through familiarity—for example, claims based on a detached scientific analysis of family dynamics would be considered “more true” than claims based on a family member’s intimate involvement with the family;
- foster a belief that there is a “one best way” to do things that can be discovered through scientific investigation.

Challenges to these assumptions emerged as early as modern approaches to knowledge itself. These objections were most evident when modern assumptions were applied not only to the natural world, but to the social world as well.

Those challenges took the shape of amore cohesive postmodern movement that surfaced in a number of academic and cultural spaces in the 20th century. This movement challenged the very premise of an ordered and unified reality that could be objectively discovered and described through science. Postmodernism had its own set of corollary assumptions that undergird this challenge:

- knowledge of the world is relational, and enabled/constrained by the linguistic constructions used to make sense of those

relational encounters: this means that knowledge of the world is accomplished through limited encounters, and the limited knowledge structures we use to make sense of those encounters;

- given the relational character of knowledge, there are many different ways of coming to know the world: no single way can be deemed “better” than another, although some ways (e.g., the scientific perspective) will be deemed “better” as a way of reinforcing power held by those who share that particular perspective;
- there is no “one best way” because any version of “best” is grounded in a particular context and way of knowing the world: to impose that “one best” on other contexts is problematic.

These premises lead to the conclusion that social structures—and the truth claims embedded in them—are *created* through human interaction (including scientific inquiry) rather than *discovered* through scientific inquiry. This ontological shift has epistemological and methodological implications for postmodern approaches. If social structures are contingent upon human interaction, then claims about social structures must be grounded in and limited to a particular social and historical context, not universally applied across time and space. Thus, postmodern approaches that often emphasize ruptures, disjunctions, tensions, instabilities, and other inconsistencies demonstrate a methodological choice aimed at revealing the faulty, constructed, and precarious character of structures as creations. Because social structures are considered created rather than natural, postmodernism often demonstrates irreverence for commonly accepted norms or truth by playing with traditional rules or expectations.

Although the focus in this entry is on scholarly theory and applications, it is worth mentioning the postmodern trends in art and design that preceded much postmodern social theory. Emerging in the first half of the 20th century, postmodern movements in architecture turned away from the minimalist designs of modern architecture that intended to strip design down its essential features (i.e., reduce it to its necessary and ordered structure). Casting modern architecture as too ahistorical or austere, postmodern architectural designs

could be described as playful, sometimes demonstrating exaggerated displays of design, structure, and color. In art, the postmodern movement moved away from attempts to accurately portray a particular social world through mastery of artistic conventions. Instead, postmodern art plays with the very notion of representation itself, a practice notably displayed in the 1929 iconic painting by René Magritte, “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” (This is not a pipe). In a similarly playful style, the constant borrowing of familiar images and recombining them in unprecedented or seemingly ironic ways is also a mark of postmodern art. This artistic movement foreshadowed postmodern social theory, which would question accepted norms and knowledge and focus more specifically on the ability of language to neutrally represent realities external to language (a premise more specifically taken up in post-structural theory that positions language as constructing our worlds, not just interpreting them).

In addition to characterizing postmodernism as a response to modern assumptions about truth, order, and science, some critics, most notably Jameson (1991), have described postmodernism in terms of the disposition of a postmodern era. This era is marked by globalization achieved largely through economic imperialism and digital exchange, as well as the failure of modern ideals to solve many of the world’s problems. Moreover, in the face of a globalized society, the failure of modernism becomes self-evident, as access to a multitude of global and cultural perspectives inevitably reveals the failure of any one totalitarian explanation of reality and fosters the creative integration and mixing of seemingly disparate styles and logics.

Overall, postmodern approaches to scholarship assume that realities are constituted through human interaction (with other humans and the object world), rather than existing apart from human interaction and waiting to be discovered. Because realities are constituted through interaction, different humans may constitute different versions of reality for their cultural or social group. Postmodern approaches are generally suspicious of claimed “universal” versions of reality, because universality is not considered “natural” and could only be accomplished if one version of reality is imposed on all. Thus, the overall goal of postmodern approaches is to reveal how seemingly “universal” structures and ways of knowing the world are actually one fallible construction among others. It is important to note that,

for postmodernists, there is no single “Truth” hidden by distorted versions of reality. Rather, there are many versions of truth competing for legitimacy. Postmodern approaches challenge any way of structuring truth and reality that overpowers others. They do this by emphasizing suspicion, irony, pastiche (borrowing and piecing together), tension, irrationality, and vulnerability to demonstrate the inadequacy of any particular structure or order for understanding reality.

A broad glance at poststructuralism

A problem remains for postmodernists. If structures are not natural, but created through interaction, how is it that so many people come to agree on and participate in common structures of knowledge and society? As addressed above, postmodernism critiques the modern notion of a naturalized and idealized order thought to derive from a transcendent universal structure. Accordingly, the structures that shape realities are assumed to be more precarious than the stable universal structures modernists might assume; filled with latent (and not so latent) breaches of order and constantly subject to change. It follows that poststructuralism is an academically grounded inquiry into the ontological foundations of these precarious—but seemingly ordered—structures that guide daily life. Like postmodernism, it is a response, critique, and extension of that which preceded it: structuralism. Structuralism seeks to theoretically explain the universal structures that shape human experience across time and space. The connection with modern thinking is evident here in the assumption of universal and totalitarian realities/structures that can be objectively discovered. Structuralism can be understood in two different ways.

Perhaps more directly, poststructuralism grows out of the linguistic structuralist movement. The structuralist movement sought to discern the fundamental structures of human consciousness that all human beings possess, and that enable them to make sense of the world. For these scholars, the primary access to such structures was through language, although there were different approaches to examining language to discern these structures. Some scholars of the movement emphasized the structure of language itself as the key to understanding structures of human consciousness (see works by Ferdinand de Saussure or Claude Lévi-Strauss). Others examined patterns of content

that emerged across cultural boundaries. For example, Sigmund Freud attempted to discern structures of the subconscious believed to be universally experienced across cultural and individual backgrounds.

Additionally, structuralism (and likewise poststructuralism) can more broadly be understood as addressing the structures of historical and cultural development. In this sense, structures under investigation are not natural structures of human consciousness manifested in language, but broad social structures manifested in dynamics of social groups and their relations over time. This tradition is most commonly associated with Karl Marx, who sought to explain patterned development of economic and social relations. In this concept of structuralism, structural patterns are analyzed in social collectives and power relationships rather than exclusively in language.

Like these two theoretical movements, poststructuralism investigates, or perhaps interrogates, structures. In fact, the distinction between structuralism and poststructuralism is often blurry. Many scholars who started with structuralist ideals leaned toward more poststructuralist ideals as their careers progressed. However, rather than treating structures as *reflected* in language and social interaction, poststructuralists have come to believe that structures are *constituted* through language and social interaction. In other words, poststructuralists have arrived at the conclusion that structures are neither inevitable nor transcendent, but immanent. These means they do not exist in some far-off hypothetical place, but their existence is embedded in everyday life—a result of everyday use of language and practices of social interaction. Structures exist only to the extent that people interact and communicate in compliance with the structures. Thus, the analytical project for poststructuralism shifts from discerning the structures *behind* language and social interaction, and focuses instead on the mechanisms by which structures are produced and maintained *through* language and social interaction.

Because structures are constituted through language and social interaction, they are inherently unstable. This inherent instability is a result of two things. First, because structures are the effect of practice, there is the persistent possibility that people might act outside traditional norms and structures, causing those norms and structures to shift, change, or break. Second, structures are inherently faulty. Because they are circumscribed by human experience and language,

they never fully capture the entirety of social and natural existence, even if they very thoroughly and accurately describe it from a particular perspective or context. This is to say there are always exceptions to the structures created through language and human interaction. For example, one can confidently say that mammals give birth to live young, until one encounters a duck-billed platypus.

From a poststructuralist perspective, structures are not natural or given: they are an accomplishment. Moreover, as constructions they are built in ways that benefit or privilege particular groups, ways of thinking, and ways of being. Consequently, in addition to discerning how structures are accomplished, many poststructuralist approaches examine how power and privilege are embedded in structures, often in seemingly mundane and “normal” ways. As a body of theory, there are many different concepts and approaches to addressing the constitution of structures and the integration of power interests into those structures. The following section highlights some of the major figures in postmodernism and poststructuralism, and the concepts they have contributed to this body of theory.

Major influences

Having offered generalizations that characterize postmodernism as a broad movement and poststructuralism as a theoretical project that addresses the ontological ground of postmodern realities, it is useful to address some of the major theoretical influences of these movements and their more specific contributions. Ironically, very few of these scholars are self-avowed postmodernists or poststructuralists. Still, their work has proven foundational to the growing body of postmodern and poststructural scholarship across many disciplines. The following is a very brief indication of the most pronounced contributions made by theorists that have influenced organizational communication research (and organizational studies more broadly).

Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) was a French philosopher, most widely acknowledged for the analytical method known as “deconstruction.” Deconstruction emerged as a method for textual analysis positing that meaning emerges in relations between words or signs, rather

than being contained in a single sign or word's natural relationship to an object or thing in the material world. Hence, the meaning of a single word is never fully present, but constantly deferred in a never-ending chain of reference to other words (a dictionary definition leads you to more words, which are themselves defined by more words, and on and on). Moreover, Derrida posited that the primary relationship between words was one of opposition or distinction, meaning that words gain meaning through juxtaposition. He called this *différance*. However, juxtaposed pairs are not neutral; they establish hierarchical relationships in which one term of the pair is privileged over the other. For example, masculinity is often privileged over femininity, rationality over emotionality, development over nature, speech over text, etc. Thus, the deconstruction of text often involves the inversion of the hierarchical pairings embedded in language to reveal the arbitrary and power-laden constructions of language.

Jean-François Lyotard's (1924–98) work is primarily cited for his resistance to “master narratives” and the drive for people in a social community to fit sensemaking practices into the master narrative of their community. Lyotard claimed that our globalized world demands that we rely on locally produced narratives. Furthermore, he suggested that, at times, certain life phenomena cannot be expressed according to a foreign narrative, and so ethical interpretation requires that we create the conditions for mutual understanding.

Michel Foucault (1926–84) is perhaps one of the most widely referenced poststructuralists in organizational studies. Outside organizational studies, his genealogical methods that trace “the history of the present” are widely taken up as a way of tracing how present circumstances are contingently and precariously predicated on discursive conditions and discontinuities of the past. In contrast to modern notions of history that depict historical progress as moving toward an idealized future, Foucault's work suggests that historical moments are full of possibility and that circumstances of any historical moment push in a particular direction at the cost of other possible futures. His genealogical methods seek to uncover these historical moments and their precluded possibilities.

Foucault's notions of discourse and power are commonly applied among organizational scholars. For Foucault, discourse refers broadly to the socially circulated ideas connected by a particular topic. For

example, analyzing the discourse of professionalism would require that one look at how professionalism is defined, by whom, and in different contexts. It would trace how those various meanings of professionalism are circulated, and how evaluations of good and bad professionalism are constructed, and in whose interest. According to Foucault, discourses are necessarily riddled with tension and contradiction. Broad social discourses are worthy of attention for Foucault because they both enable and constrain our processes of understanding and interpreting the world. This is because they offer us tools for interpretation, but those tools are limited, and may constrain sense-making in ways that sustain existing power structures.

Foucault's concept of power is also widely used. To begin, Foucault proposes the concept of *power/knowledge*. This is *not* the idea that knowing more gives one more power. Rather, it is the idea that power and knowledge are one and the same, because those in power create knowledge and truths that reinforce their power, and those who have the ability to create truths (i.e., control the discourse) will inevitably have power. Additionally, Foucault advocates for an understanding of power that is not held by one person but moves through people. For example, power/knowledge functions not because of the power of the single person who creates a truth, but because many people accept that truth as knowledge. In this sense, power is dispersed and moves through many people, but may serve the interests of a specific few. Foucault's concept of dispersed power expands far beyond power/knowledge and is elaborated upon in his concepts of *disciplinary power* and *governmentality*.

Gilles Deleuze (1925–95), whose work in collaboration with Felix Guattari is some of his most well known, is another major figure of French poststructural philosophy. His work derives from the psychoanalytic tradition, but expands beyond linguistic interpretation to address how poststructural theory accounts for materiality. Deleuze's work grapples ontologically with how the language based ideas of instability, deferred meaning, simulation, and dispersed power apply to our understanding of the material world. His concepts of the *rhizome* and *becoming* are two of the most widely integrated concepts in organizational studies. The rhizome offers a metaphor for understanding how realities are made meaningful, not through coherent centralized structures with deep roots (what he calls an arboreal model), but

with more decentralized, loosely connected, surface level structures. His notion of becoming follows this by treating ontological existence as (1) grounded in a process of becoming rather than a stable state of being, and (2) fundamentally constituted by a set of relations rather than an interior marked by solid boundaries.

Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) focused primarily on issues of media and other forms of representation. His concept of the simulacra, or simulation, describes a social condition in which the media and representations create our understandings of the world. Thus, our realities become *hyperreal* as the world created through media becomes our primary version of reality. Hyperreality occurs when the world created by the media is accepted as a transparent reflection of that which it purports to represent. Baudrillard claims it is not a transparent reflection but a simulation. Moreover, he suggested that the simulation is not just a distortion of the reality it purports to represent, but an entirely separate creation that has only a very loose connection to its referent. The high reliance on media in our society means that we live in a reality that is more of a simulation, constituted by the act of media representation.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) was a Russian philosopher concerned primarily with the concept of voice. Bakhtin suggested that voices spoken are never independently or authentically derived from a single person, but contain the echoes of many voices in a single statement. For example, if one heard an elementary school child make a comment on a politician, one could be rather certain that the statement echoes statements made by their parents, which echo the voices of news or media sources. Bakhtin analyzes how this is true for all voice(s). Thus, there is never a single authentic voice, but a voice that is constituted through its relationship with other voices.

A major critique of postmodern and poststructural theory

Before delving into the influence of postmodern and poststructural theory on organizational communication theory, it is important to acknowledge that there are significant critiques levied against postmodern and poststructural theory. Given the many different poststructural and postmodern approaches, any strong critique would focus on a particular postmodern or poststructural theory and method.

Although that list can be extensive, addressing one of the more common critiques helps to clarify the character of these approaches.

Because postmodernism and poststructuralism focus on the linguistic and communicative construction of realities, they are sometimes critiqued for suggesting that nothing actually exists. For example, a critic might suggest that a postmodernist would claim that the page or screen upon which you are reading this entry is merely a construction of language. At one level, it does seem preposterous to suggest that the physical object of the page or screen is a product of communication. Yet, a postmodernist might agree that the screen or page is indeed a linguistic construction. The difference lies (and here is the postmodern twist) in what the claim is understood as saying. The postmodernist is not suggesting that the existence of the physical object—its matter and mass—are merely a linguistic construction; that the physical object is an illusion constructed by language. Instead they are suggesting that any *understanding* of the physical object is a linguistic construction that is highly contingent upon the context. What one understands the page or screen to *be* is contingent upon its place (or potential placement) in the volume or technology of which it is a part. Moreover, the physical assembly of the volume or technology cannot occur without a socially and historically contingent concept that guides that construction. Thus, the possibility of the page or screen as we know it is contingent upon a set of linguistic constructions and relationships that are unique to a particular historical era and social situation. Thus, when a postmodernist says that “the page is a linguistic construction,” one has to understand this statement in a broader poststructural and postmodern understanding of the world.

The relevance of poststructuralism and postmodernism to organizational communication

Generally speaking, poststructural and postmodern approaches to organizational communication question the common assumption that organizations exist prior to the interactions and communication that occur on behalf of the organization. They not only question the assumed existence of organizations themselves, they question commonly accepted organizational processes as well, such as hierarchical division

of labor or organizational boundaries. By questioning traditional organizational constructions and processes, postmodern and poststructural scholars open up new possibilities for organizing and critique traditional practices. Moreover, new possibilities are often intended to disrupt traditional power structures that are embedded in assumed organizational practices.

Before delving into organizational studies specifically, it is important to note that postmodern and poststructural approaches position communication itself differently from preceding scholarly traditions. First, communication is cast as central to the *creation* of meaningful realities, not merely a conduit for information that reflects a world that already exists. This constitutive role is explicitly acknowledged in a variety of communication subdisciplines, most notably in bodies of theory such as the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) (see Putnam & Nicotera, 2009, 2010), constitutive rhetoric (Jasinski & Mercieca, 2010), and performance studies' treatment of performativity (Madison & Hamera, 2006). Second, postmodernism and poststructuralism shift the focus of communication analysis away from questions of fidelity to universal Truth (because communication does not reflect a universal Truth so much as it creates a multitude of truths) to an analysis of the communication processes by which particular versions of truth are *sustained and challenged* as dominant truths. One might examine how truths are circulated through communication by examining media or popular texts, or one might address how particular ideas are taken up and sustained in everyday talk. Finally, poststructuralism casts communication as inherently *power laden*. This is because communication is the means by which certain truths are circulated and maintained, often in seemingly neutral ways. Thus, even seemingly mundane statements can be analyzed to reveal the particular power interests in which those statements are vested. Given the *constitutive* and *power-laden* role of communication in *sustaining and challenging* particular truths and the realities those truths reflect, postmodern and poststructural approaches suggest that a close analysis of communication is absolutely critical to understanding how organizational structures are created and maintained, and for discerning how power operates through organizational practices.

Additionally, even though the remainder of this entry is dedicated to postmodern and poststructural approaches to the study of

organizational communication, scholars have also set out to describe “the postmodern organization”—that is, the changing character of organizations in postmodern contexts. Mumby (2013) summarizes these organizations—which are described as post-Fordist (a response to highly ordered production lines based on division of labor and repetitive tasks that was modeled by Ford Motor Company)—as having the following characteristics:

- “the development of a more flexible organizational structure” (p. 185);
- “the development of a ‘dedifferentiated’ labor process” (p. 185);
- “limited production runs and the development of niche markets” (p. 186);
- “the increased commodification of everyday life and the creation of products as lifestyles” (p. 186);
- “increasingly unstable, insecure employment” (p. 186);
- “a blurring of the modernist distinction between work and home” (p. 187).

These types of organizations challenge traditional organizational boundaries, embrace the instability of organizational structures, and eschew the idea of one best way or product. It is important to note that even though these organizations embrace many postmodern premises, postmodern and poststructural approaches are not limited to analysis of these organizations. Postmodern and poststructural analysis can be applied to any organization, regardless of its structural orientation.

Three expansions

This section outlines three major expansions of postmodern and poststructural approaches to organizational communication: complicating narratives, reconceptualizing power and identity, and communicative constitution of organizations. Though somewhat chronological, these expansions are interconnected and one does not supplant the other. Any of these postmodern approaches can be appropriately applied in contemporary contexts. Each expansion marks a shift in focus, nuance, and sophistication of postmodern and poststructural approaches to organizational communication.

Early postmodern approaches: Complicating narratives

Among organizational communication scholars (and organizational scholars more broadly) postmodern approaches surfaced in the 1980s in the wake of the linguistic turn that made such approaches possible. Early postmodern approaches showed a methodological sensitivity in organizational analysis that was suspicious of reinforcing the managerial “grand narrative” (an influence of Lyotard’s contributions to postmodernism). Thus, these approaches broke with more traditional organizational scholarship that privileged the perspective of managers and their priorities of efficiency and profit. They challenged the grand narrative by highlighting a multitude of organizational realities in a single organization, tracing the ways they are created and maintained, and emphasizing the relationships and tensions that exist between them. It is important to note that simply offering different perspectives on an organizational reality does not necessarily constitute a postmodern analysis. One could offer different perspectives using a modern approach, but the diversity of perspectives would be understood as individual interpretations of a common reality thought to exist in some pure form. By contrast, a postmodern approach emphasizes how multiple realities concurrently exist in relationship and in tension with each other. Thus, the multitude of organizational realities is not a result of interpretation in which one interpretation more accurately reflects reality than others (although interpretation is certainly implicated). Instead, multiple realities result from a diversity of contexts, interactions, and meaning structures that constitute (not just interpret) a multitude of realities.

David Boje (1995) offers an example of an early postmodern approach to organizational studies. He compares his analysis of storytelling that shapes the culture at Disneyland to “Tamara-land,” a postmodern theatrical work. Tamara-land takes place in a multiroom venue rather than a traditional theater where the audience sits separate from the stage that contains a common storyline. In this multiroom venue, performances occur simultaneously. At the end of every scene, each actor moves to a new room, mixing with actors who have come from different scenes and storylines in other rooms. As the actors mix and mingle through rooms and scenes, the audience must make decisions about which actors to follow. Boje compares his postmodern

analysis of Disney to the theatrical experience of Tamara-land, where scholars themselves are like the audience. Hence, scholars' accounts of organizations are implicated with suspicion, vulnerability, and partiality, as they make choices about which stories to follow. The point of the scholar is not to offer a complete picture of an organization (which is far more complex than a scripted multiroom theater production and incorporates a much larger number of actors). Instead, a postmodern approach requires that a scholar be transparent about the choices that have constituted their own experience of an organization, as they attempt to trace the multitude of realities that are woven together in relationships that are simultaneously coherent, consistent, tension ridden, and contradictory.

Boje's approach offers a clear contrast between modern critical approaches to organizational analysis and explicitly postmodern approaches. It is not enough to simply collect a diversity of accounts. One could interview multiple people who had watched a traditional theater production to arrive at a diversity of perspectives. Although such an approach may serve important goals in critical analysis, it is not a postmodern approach. A postmodern approach requires that a scholar trace particular meanings or interpretations through their relationships with other meanings and interpretations. In other words, what occurs in a particular scene or organizational context is shaped and informed by the scenes that preceded it. But those preceding scenes are diverse, and consequently infuse the scene or context in question with a variety of meanings. Thus, postmodern organizational scholars must account for the webs of meaning that—while absent like the missed performances in Tamara-land—undoubtedly inform the experiences that actors have in the organizations they participate in.

The stakes of such an analysis are well explicated in Deetz's (1992) warnings against "discursive closure." In his analysis of "the age of corporate colonization," Deetz argues that organizations are becoming increasingly powerful in their ability to promote ways of thinking about society, identity, and democracy that propagate their own financial interests. For Deetz, discursive closure occurs when alternative ways of thinking and perceiving possibilities for society, identity, and democracy are foreclosed, such that one particular way (in this case the way propagated by corporations) seems natural and unavoidable (e.g., it appears as the universal modern ideal). Deetz's own

postmodern approach seeks to forestall the discursive closure and power of corporate organizations in order to revive new paths to pursue democracy. He does this, in part, by revealing the constructed character of corporate discourses as they govern life beyond traditional organizational boundaries. Additionally, he offers newly imagined possibilities for the relationship between corporations and the pursuit of democracy.

Bridging modern and postmodern theoretical approaches, Deetz's work offers a good example of how ethics might be implicated in postmodern analysis. Because postmodernism acknowledges a multitude of realities described by a multitude of truths that are often contradictory, it is often critiqued for dissolving into complete relativism, where "anything goes." Although this is a critique worth attending to, it is not the inevitable result of postmodern analysis. As explained above, postmodernism and poststructuralism are not rejections of structures that unify social existence; rather, they critique those structures by revealing their constructed, precarious, and power-laden character. Thus, Deetz's work reveals one ethical perspective of postmodern organizational analysis, which is to prevent single realities and their constitutive sets of truths from gaining "discursive closure" that precludes or devalues alternative ways of thinking and being in the world. In application, postmodern organizational scholars may examine how a single discursive construction of reality and truth dominates a specific organizational context (e.g., gendered division of labor) or examine how organizational processes promote a particular version of reality and its constitutive truths in society more broadly (e.g., to be patriotic one must support the economy by shopping). Deetz's work also points to a second thread in postmodern and poststructural approaches because he is concerned with the ways individuals think of themselves, among other things.

Reconceptualizing power and identity

Michel Foucault (1990, 1995), as noted previously, has produced some of the most commonly applied postmodern and poststructural theory in organizational communication. His work offers organizational scholars several theoretical concepts to expand postmodern analysis beyond challenging grand narratives to a more focused analysis

addressing how particular constructions of truth are circulated. This marks a slight shift from postmodern approaches broadly, to a stronger poststructural influence that focuses on the ontological foundations of a postmodern reality. In particular, Foucault's work enabled organizational communication scholars to rethink issues of power and identity as critical to the goal oriented coordination that characterizes organizations. His popularity among communication scholars is likely influenced by the fact that he depends heavily on the notion of discourse, a fundamentally communicative phenomenon, as a key feature in the function of power and identity. His notion of discourse helps to articulate the relationship between relatively abstract claims of truth and patterns of social interaction that manifest those claims. Ultimately, Foucault's work has helped organizational communication scholars to analyze how and why certain discourses become dominant in organizational contexts, even when they may not be in the interest of the majority.

To reiterate the earlier discussion, Foucauldian scholars use the term "discourse" to refer to *the socially circulated ideas connected by a particular topic*. Thus, a discourse refers to the many *truths* that are connected by a particular topic, regardless of whether they are consistent or contradictory. *Discursive formation* is a term that accounts not only for the collection of truths, but also for the established relationships between those truths. For example, if there are two contradictory claims (e.g., one truth suggesting that corporations should have rights as a person, and one suggesting that corporations should not have rights as a person, or differences in what it means to be the ideal employee), analyzing the discursive formation helps scholars understand how one truth claim gains legitimacy over another or how one truth claim is idealized over another. Organizational scholars can trace these discourses (meaning they find evidence of these discourses) by examining official organizational texts, policies, physical environments, or everyday interactions. These traces have a dual relationship to the discourse at large: (1) they are constrained by the available ideas in the discourse because they draw on the discourse as a resource, using ideas that are already in play to convey new messages (if they did not draw on already circulated and understood ideas, they would be incomprehensible to a broader audience); and (2) they shape the discourse by reinforcing or challenging ideas

that are already circulated in the discourse. Thus, when poststructural organizational communication scholars use this approach, they examine organizational communication with this dual relationship to discourse in mind.

However, understanding the discourse is rarely the end goal for poststructural organizational communication scholars. Ultimately, the goal is to understand how discourse constitutes and structures organizational realities, to what effects, and how some discourses and structures become more dominant than others. Foucauldian analysis takes this next step by analyzing how discourses influence the ways humans regulate behavior, especially their own behavior. Organizational scholars examine this by focusing on how organizational discourses produce idealized ways of being and doing in organizational contexts specifically and society more broadly. Furthermore, they examine how people both take up and resist those discourses in their everyday interactions.

This is ultimately a question of power, but not power in the sense of a single person or position holding power and forcing others to act according to their desires. The earlier discussion of Foucault explained that he treated power as something that moves through people rather than being held by a single person. The notion of discourse helps to illustrate how this concept is applied in organizational contexts. Foucault suggested that power is not held by a single person, but exercised primarily through self-regulation in order to comply with ideals that are constituted in discursive formations. Translated into an organizational context, organizational communication scholars have used this concept to examine how organizational control occurs through the regulation of discourse rather than direct regulation of people. By circulating particular ideas of what it means to be an ideal worker, individual employees comply with those discourses in order to constitute themselves as the ideal worker. Postmodern analysis emphasizes that there are both benefits (e.g., paychecks and promotions) and disadvantages (e.g., the inability to control your own time) in complying with these discourses.

Thus, power is no longer centralized (a common theme in postmodernism) but is, rather, distributed to the employees. However, the discursive formation conditions any given employee's power: one might say that the game is rigged. The result is that managers do not have to

keep constant vigilance over employees to ensure they do their work. Instead, employees exercise power over themselves in the interest of the organization because they perceive compliance to be in their own self-interest (e.g., they are willing to give up control of their time in order to gain paychecks and the possibility of a promotion). This also marks a shift from a coercive or suppressive notion of power to a *productive* notion of power (a significant mark of the poststructuralist shift) because individuals comply with organizational discourses in order to produce themselves as ideal workers. Moreover, when a group of individuals collectively complies with an organizational discourse, their actions are coordinated in a way that produces the organization as well. Thus, organizational structures are maintained by circulating discourses that (1) constantly remind employees of what it means to be an ideal employee, and (2) maintain employees' belief that it is in their best interest to be an ideal employee. Organizational discourses therefore play a significant role in the production of their employees' identities, as employees shape their own behavior—at work and beyond—to fit the ideal of a good employee, which in turn produces the organization itself.

Tracy's (2000) analysis of her employment on a cruise ship offers an example of how this can be applied in organizational studies. In her analysis, Tracy shows how her training as a cruise ship employee communicated how an ideal employee should act, appear, and feel, and how those messages were also reinforced through posters and other artifacts strategically placed in employee areas on the ship. She applies Foucault's concept of *surveillance* to further demonstrate how the power to regulate identities is distributed rather than centralized in management. Items like customer comment cards meant that employees could be caught by anyone on the ship being "good" or "bad" at any moment and it would be reported to management. Thus, it was especially important to self-regulate at all times, as any person could participate in assessing how one measures up to the employee ideal. Tracy's analysis is decidedly postmodern in that it focused on how power is distributed rather than centralized, and in that it emphasized how individual selves are constituted, not just controlled, through organizational discourses. Tracy illustrates the latter point when she describes working in the wake of her grandmother's death, emphasizing how competing discourses of "good employee" and "good

granddaughter” created conflicting expectations for her behavior. Yet, she indicates that neither is more authentic than the other, as both result from social and organizational discourses.

Just as poststructuralism suggests that the meanings of a word or sign are always bound up in larger webs of meaning, so organizational discourses (particularly those that regulate identity) do not function in organizational isolation but rather are embedded in broader social discourses. This has opened up two additional spaces of inquiry for postmodern and poststructural scholars as they interrogate the constitution of social identity categories such as race, gender, nationality, social class, sexual orientation, etc. First, poststructural scholars might analyze how dominant discourses associated with social identities are taken up and reinforced in organizational contexts. This happens when organizational members draw on particular ideas from broad social discourses to shape organizational practices and structures. For example, scholars might analyze how organizational discourses draw on or privilege traditionally masculine or feminine ideals in an organization. Scholars might question how drawing on these ideals helps to constitute the structure of the organization (think CEO/administrative assistant, pilot/flight attendant, surgeon/nurse—all traditionally gendered *and* hierarchically related). Second, poststructural scholars might address how these processes not only constitute the organization, but also how they simultaneously reinforce and reconstitute broader social discourses and understandings of these social identity categories—making social identity categories of the past relevant and real in a contemporary context (for an example of both of these, see Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). These areas of inquiry mirror the Foucauldian notion that everyday interactions and text both draw on existing discourses and, in turn, shape those discourses.

Thus, this thread of poststructural and postmodern approaches analyzes power as decentralized by focusing on discourse as the means by which organizational interests become manifest in individual behavior. Rather than treating employees as humans who have whole identities that they bring to an organizational context, this form of power is considered productive, as it functions by constituting human identities according to discourses of the ideal worker that are taken up by employees. This process is often ensured through the threat (not

necessarily the presence) of surveillance. Thus, organizational control is often accomplished through the constitution of individual identities (or what are more often considered “subject positions” in post-modern parlance).

One last focus worth mentioning in this stream of poststructural analysis is resistance. For Foucault, resistance is inherent to/in any structural or organizational context. Because power is often exercised through the production of particular identities, resistance may show up in mundane ways by which individuals refuse to follow norms dictated by dominant discourses or do not strive to be the “ideal worker.” Resistance does not always manifest in confrontations intended to challenge or change an organization. Instead, resistance often manifests as subtle actions or adherence to identities that are not officially sanctioned by an organization. Consequently, what might be described as delinquent or incompetent behavior according to a managerial discourse might be considered resistance using a poststructural lens (see Trethewey, 1997; for a more comprehensive explanation of the resistance/power relationship, see Mumby, 2005).

Communicative constitution of organizations

A third thread of poststructural approaches to organizational communication can be explored in the relationship between the body of theory identified as communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) and poststructural approaches to organizational communication. Although CCO theory seldom uses an explicitly poststructural approach, the connections between the two bodies of theory suggest that CCO offers an additional space where poststructural approaches are especially relevant and expanding. Although CCO theory is covered at length elsewhere in this Encyclopedia, it is helpful to understand here that both CCO and poststructural scholars are concerned with the power of language to produce structures that regulate everyday life. CCO scholarship generally is concerned with the necessary (although not sufficient) role that communication plays in bringing organizations into existence, which parallels poststructural assumptions that realities (in this case organizational realities) are constituted through language, communication, and interaction. Moreover, some CCO scholars address how communication

is a fundamentally organizing process, even when a recognized organization is not fully present. This line of inquiry parallels the linguistic heritage of poststructuralism that examines how the structures and content of language shape the ways people experience the world. Thus, the very notion that communication constitutes an organization, and the investigation into how this occurs, has clear connections to poststructural organizational communication theory and scholarship. Although this firmly ontological question shows clear connections to poststructural theory, it is not a question that had been thoroughly addressed using explicitly poststructural theory. This remains an area for the development of new poststructural approaches to organizational communication.

Previous postmodern and poststructural approaches have reconceptualized important constitutive features of organizations—narratives, power, and identity; but, there has not yet been an explicitly poststructural account of the ontological constitution of organization itself. Existing accounts of CCO show overlaps with some of the central concerns of poststructural theory. For example, Bruno Latour, a significant influence on the Montreal School's approaches to CCO, focuses on structures as immanent in interaction rather than a transcendent structure reflected in human interaction. Anthony Giddens—who bears an influence on the four flows theory of CCO—shares a concern for the mutual influence between human action and structures. While sharing common concerns, poststructuralism would offer new ways of thinking through the central concerns that have already been theorized as part of CCO scholarship. Moreover, CCO has additional concerns not yet taken up in poststructural organizational communication scholarship. For example, CCO is largely concerned with how to account for materiality when claiming that communication constitutes an organization. Such concerns have the potential to push poststructural communication theory in new directions. One of the potential contributions of CCO is that it has the potential to define the unique contribution that organizational communication scholars make to the broader field of organizational studies. Incorporating the already interdisciplinary field of poststructural theory may prove a productive foundation for making this contribution.

Characteristics of the postmodern and poststructural approaches

Having reviewed postmodernism and poststructuralism generally, as well as their relevance to and emergence in organizational communication, the following summarizes seven practices and assumptions of postmodern and poststructural approaches to organizational communication scholarship. Any single characteristic does not necessarily make a postmodern or poststructural analysis, nor does a postmodern analysis require all of the following characteristics. However, this list may prove helpful in understanding how postmodern and poststructural methods proceed differently from other approaches.

First, *postmodern and poststructural approaches reject master narratives*. Unlike much organizational scholarship, postmodern approaches do not privilege the perspective of the managers or organizational priorities of profit and efficiency. More distinctively, they do not privilege any single narrative at all. This includes being careful to avoid the appearance that their own conclusions offer a master narrative that describes universal or comprehensive descriptions of organizations or organizational dynamics. Unlike modern critical theory that may cast dominant narratives as false or deceptive depictions of true reality, postmodern approaches are more likely to demonstrate how dominant narratives are better described as incomplete, by showing how they are faulted or inadequate when it comes to accounting for a diversity of experiences.

Second, *postmodern and poststructural approaches assume organizations are unstable*. As mentioned in the discussion of poststructuralism, structures are assumed to be unstable because they are created through human practice (which is subject to change) and because they are circumscribed by the experiences of the humans who interact to create them (which leads them to be limited and ultimately faulty). Thus, for poststructural scholars any level of stability experienced as organization is itself an accomplishment. The implication is that poststructural approaches focus on the very establishment of an organization as worthy of investigation. They use specific theoretical tools to both discern how stability is accomplished, and to reinsert the instability into perceived stability.

Third, *postmodern and poststructural approaches focus on everyday mundane practice and text as significant*. This is because structures are created and maintained through communicative interaction. For example, the simple fact that everyone shows up at an organizational location at a particular time and leaves at another (or the fact that they all work according to their own schedules) is a practice worth investigating. These approaches might interrogate how are time schedules enforced, the consequences for not complying, the contribution these practices make to discourses of the ideal worker, or the assumptions time practices make about an employee's responsibilities outside of work.

Fourth, *postmodern and poststructural approaches embrace tensions, contradictions, and irrationality*. Whereas modern pursuits of science emphasize the consistency of universal laws that predict organizational phenomena, postmodern approaches emphasize the failings of such attempts to create overarching and universal explanations. Emphasizing the tensions, contradictions, and normalized irrationalities in organizational contexts is one of the ways that postmodern scholars draw out the inadequacy and faults of universal narratives and laws. By embracing tensions, contradictions, and irrationality as not only inevitable but also valuable parts of organizational life, postmodern scholars attempt to keep open a play between multiple ways of being or performing in an organizational context.

Fifth, *poststructural approaches (and consequently postmodern approaches) locate meaning of any concept or object in its relationship to other concepts or objects*. Whether examining texts using a Derridian approach, examining behavior in the context of a larger organization and cultural discourse using Foucault, or examining voice using a Bakhtinian perspective, a poststructural approach focuses on how a particular concept or object becomes meaningful in relationship to other objects or concepts. Thus, when analyzing organizational processes, texts, objects, or practices, a poststructural approach would give attention to the broader network of meanings in which the analytical focus is embedded. This broader network may reach into other aspects of the organization, society, or even history.

Sixth, *poststructural approaches in particular conceptualize power as dispersed and productive rather than centralized and repressive*. As demonstrated in both discussions of Foucault above, power is often

distributed through self-regulation rather than coercive techniques. Discourse and surveillance often create the conditions under which organizational members develop the desire to comply with organizational norms and expectations in order to produce themselves as an ideal worker or organizational member. Thus, when analyzing power, the goal of poststructural scholars is to account for the ways that power works through discourse and communicative interaction to produce things (e.g., identities or organizations). Poststructuralists would analyze how a multitude of forces come together to influence a particular moment of constitution.

Seventh, *in poststructural approaches, the human subject is de-centered*. Although postmodern approaches value a diversity of perspectives that emerge from unique subject positions (i.e., identities), poststructural approaches clearly depict these subject positions as produced by discourses rather than derived from something core or essential about a single person. This means there really is not an “authentic” self in poststructural research, as any self is a product of the discourses that produce the multiple identities that a person takes up in their life. A person can still be unique in the sense that each human being has a unique combination of identities with which they are identified (gender, race, nationality, vocation, workplace, etc.). Moreover, each person will have their own experience and perspective of the discourses that shape their identities. However, a poststructural approach would maintain that uniqueness ultimately results from a unique combination of social forces, not a uniquely authentic self. Thus, while poststructural approaches often use methods that depend on perspectives of individuals, these perspectives are analyzed as evidence of the external forces that have created them.

Future directions

Even though this entry has highlighted the differences between postmodernism and poststructuralism and their intellectual movements that preceded them, it is important to keep in mind that there are also many continuities. The juxtaposition between these “post” approaches and the intellectual movements they follow is, of course, another constructed distinction that assists scholars in making sense of

a diversity of approaches to the study of organizational communication. Postmodernism and poststructuralism are themselves linguistically constituted, imbued with contradiction and irrationality, and in constant states of changing and becoming new.

As postmodern and poststructural approaches expand and change, they are likely to confront new challenges in organizational theory. One such area includes the role of materiality in constituting organizational realities. Given the heavy reliance on language, a clear account of the role that materiality plays in the constitution of organization has not yet been accounted for using poststructural theory. Poststructural theories will need to explicitly address how premises of instability and change apply to the material world. Although it might be tempting to suggest that materiality offers more permanent anchors to the precariousness of a linguistically constructed world, more nuanced poststructural approaches will likely address how materiality itself has its own inherent instability that is thoroughly integrated with communicatively constructed realities and organizations.

Addressing issues of identity and subjectivity will also continue to present a challenge for postmodern research. Postmodern approaches embrace the perspectives that are shaped by unique subject positions and the identity groups that shape those positions; but, they also challenge the idea that identity groups share any universal characteristics. Relatedly, issues of intersectionality (the ways that multiple identifications shape and influence one another—e.g., how is whiteness experienced differently by men and women, or rich and poor) will need more specific attention in organizational contexts. Postmodern and poststructural theories are well positioned to develop theoretical tools to account for the careful balance of identities as significant structures that shape individual subject positions, while also opening those structures up to vulnerability and instability that demonstrate possibilities for change. In general, poststructural and postmodern theories will face the challenge of developing more sophisticated methods to investigate the integration of identity, organization, and society.

Along these lines, issues of agency will also be an area of development for postmodern and poststructural organizational scholars. The tension between structure and agency has long been a point of discussion in organizational communication, and postmodern and poststructural approaches offer a unique approach that focuses on the

importance of structures, while simultaneously questioning their authority. Moreover, the question of whether agency is a uniquely human trait reveals tensions among postmodern and poststructural scholars. Creating a more nuanced understanding of human and object agency (if objects do indeed have agency) is another theoretical ground where postmodern and poststructural approaches might grow.

Finally, emerging problems for organizing in a postmodern world will provide an additional ground for new postmodern approaches. The increasingly important role of technology in creating flexible organizational structures through new means of virtual organizing, surveillance, and developing global relationships will provide focal points for postmodern scholarly investigations. Additionally, global organizations often merge diverse cultural structures, norms, and practices—a dilemma that will likely require postmodern and poststructural sensitivities in scholarly accounts.

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