

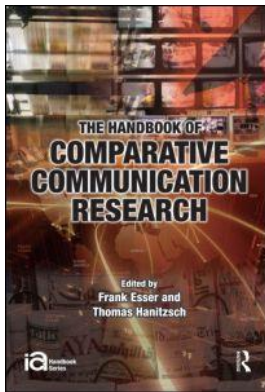
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Comparing Organizational and Business Communication

Bernard McKenna, Victor J. Callan, and Cindy Gallois

The fields of organizational and business communication have a long and diverse history, and one that is impossible to capture in a single overview essay. Indeed, some would argue that these fields cover so much territory as to lose coherence as fields at all. Nevertheless, they have some important characteristic features. According to Tourish and Hargie (2004), organizational communication is concerned with “how people ascribe meanings to messages, verbal and nonverbal communication, communication skills, the effectiveness of communication in organizations, and how meanings are distorted and changed while people exchange messages, in both formal and informal networks” (p. 10). As we argue in this essay, this definition of organizational communication needs to be extended even beyond this broad one, especially to include more recognition of the current state of scholarship and theorizing.

SINGLE CULTURE OR COMPARATIVE?

In recent years, the rapid increase in multinational and globalized organizations has increased the emphasis on cultural considerations, particularly cultural diversity, within every aspect of management. Given this situation, one would expect an equivalent increase in the number of comparative studies of organizational communication. Surprisingly, this is not the case, although there has been some increase in the number of comparative studies in management. Most of these studies have taken an emic approach (cf. Peterson, 2002); that is, they have compared cultures, looking for specific features or practices within single cultures. A minority have taken an etic approach, aiming to determine generic features of management that are universal across cultures. As such, they have canvassed cultural (and in some cases universal) influences on leadership, negotiation, and decision making, all of which implicate communication. However, despite this growth in studies in cross-cultural management, there remains a paucity of comparative studies of organizational communication processes of any type.

In this essay, we describe briefly the key concepts and trends in organizational communication over the past 40 years, as well as describing more specifically the trends in cross-cultural management and organizational communication. In doing this, we examine the state of comparative studies of organizational communication, examine some of the consequences of the isolation

of comparative work from the mainstream, and suggest some potential remedies. As the evolution of organizational communication is so well documented, we offer only a focused critique of the current state of scholarship, though more significantly we identify a potential direction that returns to the original purpose of the field.

In particular, we propose that organizational communication and comparative studies of communication in organizations are at risk of losing their relevance to the field as a whole because they have not taken full account of recent developments in the mainstream of organizational communication. Furthermore, they may now be losing relevance to practitioners, because there is a distinct gap between the academy and the world of practice. This outcome is unfortunate for the field of organizational communication, which from the beginning has been proud of its practical focus. Relatedly, organizational communication risks losing its distinctive identity, as increasingly we see a blending of organizational communication studies, on the one hand, and public relations, media studies, advertising, and marketing, on the other. Interestingly, this has happened somewhat less in cross-cultural and national comparative research than in the much larger body of single-culture studies, and it may be that cross-cultural research gives some pointers to the way back to the origins of the field.

In an earlier review of the field, Jones, Watson, Gardner, and Gallois (2004) identified a number of challenges for organizational communication in the 21st century, distilled from previous research and reviews. These challenges include innovating in theory and methodology, acknowledging the role of ethics, putting more emphasis on macro-level issues, examining new organizational structures and technologies, increasing understanding of the communication of organizational change, and exploring diversity and the intergroup aspects of communication. The final challenge strongly implicates comparative and cross-cultural research, given that culture and ethnicity comprise a major source of diversity in organizations. Furthermore, these six challenges all hold practical outcomes and are clearly reflected in the problems faced by managers and organizations today.

The literature has moved in these directions, as our review shows. Indeed, since the turn of the 21st century there has been a considerable emphasis on the management of diversity. Many cross-cultural studies are set in multinational companies and focus on the impact of cultural diversity on leadership, team performance, negotiation, conflict, and social identity. Nevertheless, we found that leading-edge research in organizational communication has to some extent neglected practical outcomes. Instead, there has been an increased emphasis on theory and methodology per se, as well as on using real contexts as examples for the development of theory rather than using theory to lead to practical outcomes. As a result, journals and papers aimed at practitioners continue to draw on older research to suggest strategies for dealing with these problems.

The theory, research, and practice of organizational communication have changed considerably over the past 30 years, to the point where this area is now considered a field in its own right, rather than a spinoff from management or psychology (Putnam & Krone, 2006). These changes have been chronicled in a number of state-of-the-art papers (Gardner, Paulsen, Gallois, Callan, & Monaghan, 2001; Jones et al., 2004; Taylor, Flanagan, Cheney, & Seibold, 2000). More importantly, the field has generated a number of key handbooks, including McPhee and Tompkins' (1985) *Organisational Communication: Traditional Themes and New Directions*; Jablin, Putnam, Roberts, and Porter's (1987) *Handbook of Organisational Communication: An Interdisciplinary Perspective*; Goldhaber and Barnett's (1988) *Handbook of Organisational Communication*; Jablin and Putnam's (2001) *The New Handbook of Organisational Communication*, and Putnam and Krone's (2006) five-volume *Organisational Communication*. The broad consensus among these works is that there are distinct phases, "turns," or perspectives in the field.

PHASES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

In the early 1980s, Putnam (1982; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983) distinguished between functionalist, interpretive, and critical studies, reflecting the influence of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) famous two-by-two sociological paradigm. Redding and Tompkins (1988) similarly identified a progression from prescriptive to critical perspectives and divided the history of organizational communication research into two eras: pre- and post-1970. The pre-1970 era comprised three approaches: formulary-prescriptive, characterized by rules and prescriptions for effective communication; empirical-prescriptive, characterized by anecdotes and case studies; and applied scientific, characterized by objective, scientific measurement. The post-1970 era, according to Redding and Tompkins, also comprised three approaches: modernistic, characterized by discovering law-like regularities; naturalistic, essentially ethnographic and social constructionist; and critical, characterized by critique and exposure.

The existence of such phases is noted in a recent review. In a thematic survey of *Management Communication Quarterly (MCQ)* articles, Rooney, McKenna, and Barker (2011) identified a distinct evolution over its 23-year history. At its inception in 1987, articles featured a quantitative emphasis and a managerialist orientation. From 1992 to 1996 an emerging interest in interpretive perspectives on organizational life appeared. From 1997 to 2001, the journal reflected the influence of the linguistic turn and an interpretive sensitivity, particularly evident in qualitative research methods, as concern shifted to issues of diversity, power, gender, and subjectivity. From 2002 to 2006, interpretive, discursive, and critical scholarship took a firmer hold. At the same time, there was a growing alignment with management and organization studies, rather than considering implications for communication practice. Since 2007, this strong discursive and critical trajectory has been maintained.

It would be fair to say that the comparative study of culture and its impact on organizational behavior did not have a strong influence on these trends either before or after 1970. Adler (1983) noted that in U.S. management journals, fewer than 5% of papers in the 1970s focused on cross-cultural issues. Those papers that did tended to study a single culture, with fewer than 1% of papers comparing two or more cultures. Research outside the U.S. (particularly in Europe, the UK, and Australasia) also tended to focus on issues of interest to one culture only. *MCQ*, as a leading (some would argue the leading) journal in organizational communication, contains a significant minority of papers from non-U.S. and indeed non-Anglo-Celtic countries (particularly from European ones). Nevertheless, there is a surprising lack of comparative perspective in these papers, so that one must build an understanding of cultural differences by comparing the results of different studies where this is possible.

The definition of the field, and its very name, have undergone similar changes. Putnam and Krone (2006) noted that before 1967, "organizational communication" did not exist as a widely acknowledged term. Instead, the emerging field was labeled "business," "industrial," "corporate," or "managerial" communication, and was concerned with communication efficiency and effectiveness, the ultimate aim being to enhance productivity. These terms characterize the practical and manager-oriented approach to organizational communication that many researchers promote up to the present day. Culture, even organizational culture (in spite of Schein's, 1985, examination of this area in the U.S. context), was not a very salient variable in these analyses.

By the late 1970s, researchers began to explore different conceptions of communication to counter the dominant conduit model (Reddy, 1979). Weick (1969), for example, strongly influenced organizational communication by conceptualizing communication within organizations as a process of social interaction, emphasizing the action organizing over the noun, "organization," and from this developing the notion of sensemaking (Weick, 1988). Putnam and Krone propose

that 1981 was the landmark date that ushered in interpretive and critical approaches to organizational communication, drawing on the legitimacy that Burrell and Morgan's model had given to interpretive scholarship.

DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONS

The 1980s were also strongly influenced by Geert Hofstede's (1980) *Culture's Consequences*, a seminal research program on the dimensions of culture. Based in the Netherlands, Hofstede set out to compare the work-related values of as many cultures as he could get access to, mainly using data collected from managers in large multinational organizations. From these comparisons, Hofstede derived four dimensions that distinguish the orientations of various cultures. The first was individualism–collectivism, or the extent to which the individual person or the group is given priority. Individualist cultures like the U.S. and other Anglo-Celtic cultures tend to communicate directly and explicitly at individual level, whereas members of collectivist cultures tend to pay more attention to groups and group boundaries in their communication. The second dimension was power distance, or the extent to which hierarchy is invoked and authority deferred to, or the extent to which individuals are treated as equals. Uncertainty avoidance reflects the extent to which ambiguity is avoided or welcomed, which is a key factor in risk-related communication. Masculinity–femininity, or the extent to which traditional masculine or feminine values are given precedence, is also important in organizational functioning. Later, a fifth dimension was added: short- or long-term orientation, or Confucian dynamism, which is the extent to which actions that affect the future are given priority (Hofstede & Bond, 1988).

Despite the significant contributions of his framework, almost from the start (and increasingly since 2000) Hofstede's approach has been criticized, particularly around the claim that his sampling procedures played down the multicultural nature of the countries that he studied. Subsequent research has shown his dimensions to be variable within cultures and even within individuals across contexts, and the relative contributions of culture and individual factors to organizational behavior have been explored. Recently, Ailon (2008) provided a critical reading of *Culture's Consequences* using an analytical strategy in which the book was mirrored against itself and analyzed in terms of its own proposed value dimensions. Ailon raised critical concerns across paradigm boundaries, and argued for adopting norms of reflexivity that transcend existing notions of cultural relativism. In spite of critiques like this one, Hofstede's work remains highly influential, and numerous cross-cultural studies use at least the individualism–collectivism dimension to frame their research questions.

Hofstede's approach, however, has not penetrated very deeply into cross-cultural research in organizational communication. Nevertheless, the opportunities do exist. For example, a cross-cultural issue in intercultural communication pedagogy, the notion of World Englishes, has not surfaced in organizational communication research—rather ironic given the “linguistic turn” (see next section) in this field. Essentially, the debate in World Englishes literature and practice arises from the knowledge that three-quarters of the world's English users do not have English as their first language (Canagarajah, 2006, 2007). In many places English is learned for its instrumental value, and speakers develop versions of the language that are explicitly tailored to particular contexts like multinational organizations. Thus, the role of English, and indeed the understanding of it, is a source of diversity in global organizations, as well as a potential source of miscommunication and conflict. One implication for intercultural communication scholarship is that Western-dominated orientations to the topic need to be reconfigured to take much more account of cross-cultural discursive competence (see, for example, Bhatia, 2004; Yli-Jokipii, 1997).

THE LINGUISTIC TURN

A major development in mainstream organizational communication over the past two or three decades has been the emergence of interpretivist and critical perspectives, the latter particularly deriving from the “linguistic turn.” The entrenchment of the linguistic turn (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Grant, Hardy, Osrick, & Putnam, 2004a; Putnam, 1998) is a significant development, while its emphasis is manifested mostly in various forms of discourse theory. The publication of the *SAGE Handbook of Organisational Discourse* (Grant et al., 2004b) indicates the strength and vitality of this approach, as they repeat Mumby and Clair’s (1997) claim that “organisations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse” (p. 181).

Another significant development has been the influence of interpretivist perspectives, particularly social constructionism, sensemaking, and communities of practice, which share the underlying concept of organizations as systems of relations. The work of Gergen (2001, social constructionism) and Weick (1988, sensemaking) greatly influenced this approach, as well as Lave and Wenger (1991, organizational learning, see Allard-Poesi, 2005, for a review and critique of this area). Scholars like Cooren (2004), and Taylor and van Every (2000) adopt a post-modern approach and integrate concepts of culture into their analyses. Cooren (2004) focuses on applying conversation analysis to routine everyday situations to “reveal the phenomena of collective mind and distributed cognition” (p. 518).

As discourse, sensemaking, and social constructionist theories have been incorporated into theory in organizational communication, the boundaries between this field and related areas have blurred. For example, Spender and Tsoukas (2006) propose a bounded rational understanding of the organization in which knowledge emerges as an outcome of the subtle interplay between people’s practices and their identities (p. 24). They view the discursive approach to organizational theory as more useful than behaviorist and cognitivist approaches. Tsoukas (2005) summarizes the usefulness of discourse theory in understanding organizations as giving priority to communication in constructing meaning in organizations.

Underlying most discursive theories of organization is an assumption about the productive nature of discursive practices (Deetz, 2001, pp. 5–6). Communication is seen as constitutive: it not only reflects, but also produces or creates, and reproduces and alters social and organizational realities (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009). However, there is considerable diversity in discourse approaches to organizational communication. Deetz advances four contrasting research approaches that are differentiated by whether an orientation reproduces or disrupts dominant practices and whether it privileges local or *a priori* concepts. First, normative studies accept organizations as naturally existing objects (p. 19). Second, interpretive studies aim “to show how particular social realities are produced and maintained through ordinary talk, stories, rites, rituals, and other daily activities” (p. 23). Thirdly, critical studies conceptualize organizations as socio-historical creations brought about in conditions of struggle and through power relations (p. 25). Finally, dialogic studies focus on micro-political processes and the joint nature of power and resistance to it, in order to bring to the surface conflicts that are suppressed in everyday experiences, meaning systems, and self-conceptions (p. 31).

Heracleous (2006a) similarly identifies different strands in discourse theories of organizations. Like Deetz, he identifies the interpretive approach, where language is seen not merely as an instrumental means of information exchange but as constructive, through its effects on actors’ thoughts, interpretations, and actions (p. 11). The critical approach, according to Heracleous, shares the interpretive assumption about the role of discourse in socially constructing reality, but “is ethically committed to unmasking the processes through which discourses promote social constructions that support and perpetuate the interests of dominant groups or classes” (p. 15).

Conrad and Haynes (2001) identified an important point of difference in discourse approaches. Some approaches focus primarily on either the subjective experiences of relatively autonomous human actors (“action”). Others are more concerned with the social and organizational structures that constrain and circumscribe choices. Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration has been useful to some discourse theorists in reconciling these approaches; he argues that structure and agency are intricately related in a recursive way (McKenna & Rooney, 2008, p. 543; see also Heracleous, 2006b).

Concurrent with the shift towards a discourse orientation, organizational communication has moved away from its original, more instrumental, concerns in the world of practice. For example, empirical discourse studies have been criticized for not looking at how language (re)constitutes social arrangements, overlooking relations of power, emphasizing monologic orientations, and using a somewhat one-dimensional view of discourse (Grant et al., 2004a, p. 15). To some extent, this is probably due in part to a more critical orientation that aims to move organizational communication research away from simply serving the interests of management.

For whatever reason, among the changes has been the tendency to place research on workplace oral and written skills, as well as computer-mediated communication, in technically oriented journals (e.g., *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*; *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*). Similarly, practice-oriented and psychology-based interpersonal and small-group theory, dominant in earlier research on organizational communication, has become less significant. In a related development, cross-cultural research has ended up in niche journals like the two we mention in this chapter, rather than in mainstream journals in organizational communication. By contrast, exploration of the theoretical foundations of the field, along with the scope of research, has considerably expanded.

Given all these tensions and changes, a major concern today is that organizational communication research is losing coherence. Mumby and Stohl (1996) argued that, although organizational communication as a field of study appears fragmented, one can make a strong case for continuation of its status as a discipline based in four central problematics (voice, rationality, organization, organization–society) that implicitly frame a sense of community and identity. These problematics are similar to some of the challenges that Jones et al. (2004) posed in their review. They argued for the need for more concentration on the diversity in and across organizations and consideration of the impact of this diversity on, among other things, cultural issues, identity, intergroup communication, and opportunity for voice.

More than a decade after their review, Mumby and Stohl’s optimism about organizational communication’s disciplinary status seems less convincing. While many of the issues raised have been addressed by an increasing number of studies, the fragmentation of perspective and tendency to differentiate rather than bridge across theories continues. Later, we suggest the potential role that can be played by a return to the earlier focus on relevance and impact, in the form of outcomes that can be used by organizations and their employees, while still maintaining research rigor and theoretical integrity.

COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

As the field of organizational communication turned toward the self-reflexive study of language and discourse, and away from practice, what was happening to comparative studies in this field? As we have noted, there were few such studies—indeed, few comparative studies in management as a whole. Probably as a result, in 1994 the journal *Cross-Cultural Management: An International Journal* was launched, with a brief specifically to look at comparative work. Its

mission is to be the leading source of research on multicultural management issues, addressing cross-cultural management from all management angles. The journal concentrates on work that investigates intracultural, intercultural, and transcultural management issues, including studies of comparative communication in organizations.

In 2001, a second journal, spearheaded by senior researchers in cross-cultural psychology, was launched: the *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*. Its brief, as reported by the journal editors, is to provide a specialized academic medium and main reference for the encouragement and dissemination of research on cross-cultural aspects of management, work, and organization. Since then, these two journals have published a large number of the comparative studies in the fields of management, work, and organizations.

Given the prominence of these journals in promoting comparative research, it is important to review the nature, quantity, and methodology used in the organizational communication publications in these two journals. *Cross-Cultural Management* in the last five years, for example, has published studies that examine the primary or secondary role of organizational communication issues in cross-cultural studies of negotiation practices (various studies that include Chinese, New Zealand, Japanese, Spanish, and Dutch employees) and in managing and leading culturally diverse work teams (various studies with Australian, French, British, Japanese, and Pacific Islander employee samples). There are also single culture studies of communication problems in the workplace (e.g., Thailand), and in cross-cultural skills training (e.g., U.S. workers in Mexico). At the same time, the number of comparative communication studies is no more than three to four per year on average. The focus is narrow, and is in particular upon organizational communication issues in culturally diverse work teams and in business negotiation.

Turning to the *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management* for the same time frame, a very similar story emerges around the number of publications per year, and the main topics of comparative organizational communication research. There are again three to four papers per year on cross-cultural negotiation (with samples across various papers from China, U.S., Russia, New Zealand, South Africa, Finland, Mexico, Turkey), studies of culturally diverse work teams (Denmark, Japan, Austria, Hong Kong), superior-subordinate communication (Spain, U.S., France, Italy, UK), and on influence tactics (U.S., Hong Kong). In 2009, this journal also called for papers for a special issue on managing cross-cultural conflicts in organizations.

Looking at the preferred methodologies of organizational communication studies published in both journals, most studies are questionnaire-based, although some are observational or use in-depth interviewing techniques (e.g., Sriussadaporn, 2006). Some large-scale and longitudinal studies have appeared which assess the impact of communication variables on diversity management (cf. Vallaster, 2005). Overall, the research in both journals has a strong emphasis on the practical management of issues such as cultural diversity, successful business negotiation, and reducing communication problems in the multicultural workplace.

This methodology echoes that of mainstream cross-cultural psychology and cross-cultural or intercultural communication more than it draws on the approaches of organizational communication (especially those described above). This tendency, unfortunately, makes it less likely that this comparative research will penetrate deeply into the mainstream, in spite of the goodwill of people in both areas. Indeed, the critical approach in organizational communication following the linguistic turn includes a clear place for culture and for a cultural approach to communication. What is different is that it is not explicitly comparative, and does not use controlled and generally quantitative methods that allow direct comparisons between groups, organizations, or cultures. There is a challenge here for cross-cultural researchers in organizational communication to use the methods of critical analysis to bring out the role of the larger cultures in which organizations are situated.

Examining the focus of the research papers in more depth in both journals, many of the communication studies that take a comparative perspective concern intercultural communication competence and competence training (e.g., Celaya & Swift, 2006; Fish & Bhanugopan, 2008; Matveev & Nelson, 2004). These studies canvass cultural differences in communication style, including communication by consumers, and the impact of competence training on team performance, psychological adjustment, and the like. This represents a long tradition in intercultural communication training, to which business travelers, as short-term sojourners, are especially attracted. Although there have been many criticisms of this approach (e.g., Cargile & Giles, 1996), it has proven particularly useful in the business context. There are also a significant number of studies concerning cultural influences on conflict management (e.g., Lee & Rogan, 1991) and the impact of culture on negotiation style and effectiveness (e.g., Metcalf, Bird, Peterson, Shankarmahesh, & Lituchy, 2007).

A second focus on communication in recent cross-cultural management research is on social identity and cultural values, and their impact on intercultural interactions and adjustment (cf. Luring, 2008). This work strongly reflects the influence of Hofstede's dimensions and research derived from them. Typically, an individualist country like the U.S. or Australia is compared to a collectivist one like China or Japan. Sometimes more than two cultures are compared, but a simplistic focus on individualism–collectivism is very common. As well as individualism–collectivism, this work concentrates on specific values like trust, deception, and culturally specific models of relationships, and on boundary maintenance and permeability (e.g., Loh, Restubog, & Gallois, 2009; Shamir & Melnik, 2002).

A third communication focus in these cross-cultural management studies is on leadership, influence, and the behavior of subordinates. In addition to comparative work on influence strategies in different cultures (e.g., Leong, Bond, & Fu, 2006), the impact of culture on leadership effectiveness is studied in detail. Relatively unstudied parts of the world (e.g., Africa: Bolden & Kirk, 2009; India: Kakar, Kakar, Kets de Vries, & Vringnaud, 2002) are represented. Importantly, culture is found to be a more potent influence on leadership effectiveness than other variables like gender (e.g., Yan & Jerry Hunt, 2005; Zander & Romani, 2004).

Overall, papers in both journals do respond to the call, noted earlier, by Jones and her colleagues (2004) for more concentration on the diversity in and across organizations and consideration of the impact of this diversity on identity, intergroup communication, conflict management, team performance, and the like. Furthermore, publications in both journals generally reflect Peterson's (2002) observations about the advantages of applying the linguistics-based emic–etic perspective to cross-cultural management.

ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH, COMPARATIVE FOCUS, AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE

As we noted earlier, communication scholarship has been distinguished from its inception by interest in the *practical* issues of organizations (Putnam & Krone, 2006). Thus, scholarship in organizational communication in the 1980s involved authors analyzing actual organizational interactions (see Ashcraft et al., 2009). For practitioners, there is no lack of demand for research-based information on topics related to communication in organizations, including intercultural and cross-cultural communication in the workplace.

Indeed, journals aimed at practitioners (e.g., *Harvard Business Review*) publish many papers providing strategies for communication between leaders and others, negotiation within organizations and with external stakeholders, the impact of organizational structure and new technology

on communication (and how to communicate via new technology), communication and identity, and so forth. These are key topics today for managers and their organizations, and one would expect current research in organizational communication to be widely cited by practitioners. Given the number of multinational companies, one would also expect a very strong demand for advice on intercultural communication competence. Similarly, it could be expected that researchers would be careful to draw out the implications of their work for organizational practice, including advice on how organizations might improve communication practices put under strain by the growth in more multicultural workforces, as well as by more culturally diverse customers.

In spite of this demand by practitioners, Ashcraft et al. (2009) today identify organizational communication more closely with organizational behavior and organization theory than with more practically oriented business communication. As a possible explanation, they refer to structuration theory (Giddens, 1984). They propose that, while structuration theory has influenced many areas of social theory, communication scholars have adopted it in ways that are similar to those of management and organization studies (Ashcraft et al., 2009).

Changes in communication technology and the impact of new technology and new media have affected the organizational communication literature. Typical issues being investigated include the impact of the Internet on knowledge management (e.g., Jackson, Dawson, & Darren, 2003), virtual teams and networking (Wilkinson & Young, 2002), and e-health (e.g., see Koerber & Still's, 2008, introduction to the special issue in *Technical Communication Quarterly*). In addition, there has been a renaissance in the study of rumor and its role in organizations under change, globalization, and new media (e.g., Bordia & Rosnow, 1998; Bordia, Jones, Gallois, Callan, & diFonzo, 2006). This work has attracted considerable interest from managers and other practitioners, motivated by the need to deal with pressures around globalization and the impact of continued change in organizations (see DiFonzo, 2008, for a recent review of rumors research that is oriented to practitioners).

Furthermore, the links between internal and external communication, culture, and identity (e.g., Haslam, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002) bring organizational communication into cognate areas such as advertising, marketing, and public relations. One effect of this broadening of the field is to shift research on organizational communication into the journals of other disciplines, such as IT and other specialist areas (e.g., health journals), and out of mainstream journals in communication.

THE DIVIDE BETWEEN COMMUNICATION RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS

Analyses of the researcher–practitioner divide are not new. In the past, many academic researchers have raised concerns not only that this gap exists, but also that the divide is widening in organizational, management, and business communication research (Anderson, Herriot, & Hodgkinson, 2001; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; Thomas, 2007). The evidence shows that, in spite of the overlap in interests and issues noted above, researchers rarely turn to practitioners for inspiration about what research questions to ask (Rynes et al., 2001), while managers rarely turn to academics to inform their practice (Smeltzer, 1993).

This widening of the gap is occurring in many countries, and in response some governments (e.g., UK, Australia, USA) have become more directive about what types of research they are prepared to support in the social sciences. As Anderson et al. (2001) assert, governments as stakeholders in research have become more vigilant about how they spend taxpayers' funds. They ask for more accountability from researchers and look for advice in devising solutions

to “wicked problems” in key environmental, economic, and social arenas. Large multinational organizations and peak bodies in the business, public, and non-government organization sectors are urging stronger researcher–practitioner alignment as they seek advice about how to respond to complex and transformational organizational pressures (e.g., globalization, constant change, more complex structures).

There are great opportunities here for more comparative studies in organizational communication. For example, globalization requires adaptation to virtual communication as the main medium, which, as Monge (1998) points out, is an issue that should broaden the academic scope and relevance of organizational communication. In addition, the development of customer-centric products and services in large multinational organizations requires more effective communication across cultural boundaries about the merits of their products and services, while increased workforce diversity requires improved interpersonal, intergroup, and intercultural communication in the workplaces of multinationals.

We decided to look systematically at recent issues in mainstream journals that publish papers in organizational and business communication, including comparative studies, and to examine whether they provide explicit implications and advice for practice either in single-culture or in more multicultural organizational environments. We examined issues for three years (2006 to 2008) in 18 journals that represent a broad cross-section of peer-reviewed academic journals that attract the published research of organizational communication researchers. The journals we selected vary in ranking, acceptance rates, and mission, but all appeal to organizational communication researchers who might want to explore comparative issues in business communication. Three of these journals also have an explicit focus on cross-cultural studies—*Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, and *Cross-Cultural Management: An International Journal*.

We identified articles on organizational and business communication published in these journals, initially by searching for keywords such as *communication*, *organization*, *culture*, *cross-cultural*, *management*, and *employee communication* in the titles, citations, or abstracts. This broad search netted 95 articles in the relevant period. In addition, we searched in the texts for words such as *practical applications*, *implications*, *implications for management*, and *implications for practitioners*.

Examination of the 95 articles reveals that five journals in particular (*Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Management Communication Quarterly*, *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management*, *Cross-Cultural Management: An International Journal*) provided more than half of the publications that included discussions or statements on practical applications, implications for management and other practitioners, and so forth. It is interesting that the two comparative management journals were among the most practitioner-focused. Only six journals had separate identified practical implications sections in their articles. More general organizational journals like *Human Relations* and the *Journal of Organizational Behaviour* did have some authors who provided considerable comment about the practical utility of research findings for communication practitioners. In *Human Relations*, these applications involved practical advice around such issues as the language of teamwork in the operating theatre, the standardization of communication in medical training, improving internal corporate communications, managing disputes and the limits of virtual communication, lessons in communication building relationships through a case study of *Médecins Sans Frontières*, and the implications for work–life boundary management of using a personal digital assistant.

The *Journal of Organizational Behaviour*, unlike *Human Relations*, provided a separate section on the practical implications of the findings. These papers reported on applications around racial identification and communication behavior, how leaders can focus change interventions on

integrative mechanisms for better debate and dialogue, and how the perception of communication climate influences employee involvement. The *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* did not record any articles that met our criteria; this is disappointing, because the focus of this journal is to locate and explicate cultural and cross-cultural similarities and differences in all areas of psychology, and because a significant number of papers on organizational behavior (i.e., a field of research closely aligned to organizational communication) do appear there.

The *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Journal of Communication Management*, *Cross-Cultural Management: An International Journal*, and *Management Communication Quarterly* each had sections devoted to the implications of research findings. The *Journal of Applied Communication Research* and *Cross-Cultural Management: An International Journal* contained the most consistent focus in its published papers on the implications for practice in various applied contexts, including cultural ones. For instance, in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* these implications include information seeking and workplace safety, managing communication in contexts with religious differences, communicating knowing through communities of practice, managing emotion and communication in the workplace, using friendship networks to reduce employee turnover, lessons around corporate communications based on a case study of American Airlines and its response to the September 11 attack, and advice on the use of communication strategies to build work-team identification.

Our exploratory analysis shows that researchers make efforts to draw out the implications of their research for organizational practice, and that at least some major journals in organizational communication encourage them to do so. However, the small number of business or organizational communication articles overall, and the small number in turn that report upon comparative studies in the high-ranking communication journals (e.g., *Human Communication Research*, *Journal of Communication*) provide substantial evidence that current research is moving away from practice. In an academic climate that rewards publication in the best journals (now explicit in North America, Europe, and Australasia), there is little incentive to study functional, practical issues whether normative or not, and so academic work is not reaching the wide audience that it should. Indeed, it tends to be newer or lower-ranking business communication journals (in terms of impact factors and citation rates) that have focused most on relating findings to actual management and communication practices in organizations.

It can also be observed that studies involving organizational communication within and across cultures pose considerable challenges. Avoiding the earlier critiques of “airport” research, where cross-cultural investigators did not become involved in the cultures that they were studying, today comparative research in organizational communication typically involves the formation of teams of researchers who live in the respective countries being studied and who collect data by using a common set of procedures and methods. There is the time and expense of locating and connecting with fellow cross-cultural researchers, and the difficulty in bringing together and interpreting data from across organizations and across countries and cultural groups.

Looking to the future, there are several factors working against the closing of this divide between academic researchers and practitioners in the area of organizational communication, and in encouraging more researchers to complete studies into the more comparative aspects of organizational communication. There are clear differences between practitioners and academics in their frames of reference that need attention (Anderson et al., 2001; Rynes et al., 2001), while there is a continued lack of contact and shared socialization between these two communities. There is also the expense of doing more applied research, and the additional costs in completing high-quality research across national and cultural boundaries. However, on a more positive note, Hodgkinson and his colleagues (2001) argue that the shared focus on “know-how” in both communities will ensure that the researcher–practitioner divide does not become too wide. In addition, as govern-

ments and funding agencies focus more on research that contributes to evidence-based policies and strategies and that shows governments working together by funding studies across their national borders, researchers may be encouraged to design and implement more comparative studies of organizational communication.

Still on this positive note, the two cross-cultural management journals, where most comparative organizational communication appears, both have a relatively strong focus on practice. *Cross-Cultural Management* requires a section on practical implications, and the *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Management* includes many plausible suggestions for practice. As the research in these two journals has tended to emphasize older theories and paradigms, and has largely ignored the linguistic turn, there may be more scope for practical implications. Unfortunately, perhaps for the same reason, to date the work in these journals has had little impact on the mainstream of organizational communication research. As we have noted, cross-cultural work does not appear often in the major organizational communication journals and organizational communication itself does not appear often in the top journals in communication and management. Instead, organizational communication and comparative organizational communication have stayed isolated, and exist in a “steady state” without any strong evidence of major growth.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

What can we say, then, about the state of organizational communication today, and the impact of the comparative perspective on it? As other reviews have made clear, the field is broad to the point of fragmentation, strongly influenced today by critical, interpretive, and postmodern perspectives. Academic programs in organizational communication are proliferating, but they are, like the field as a whole, in some danger of being swallowed up by organizational and management studies. Outside the United States, it is probably more common to see researchers in organizational communication located in business schools than in communication departments, which tend to be focused more on media and the practice of journalism.

Is this a good or a bad thing? Business schools are highly focused upon teaching ideas that are relevant to the role of managers in global contexts. In one sense, the strong teaching links between organizational communication and business should be helpful in bridging the gap between research and practice. Business schools are also very externally focused, and expect their teachers and students to investigate issues through multiple lenses. This comparative focus is especially strong in the areas of building knowledge and capabilities around working within and across cultures when doing business.

While the studies in comparative organizational communication are few, they have retained a strong emphasis on work that has practical value for managers and others involved in multicultural or multinational business organizations. A recommendation for the future, therefore, is for this research to be brought more strongly into the mainstream of valorized research publications. This will require a culture change, such that scholars conducting reviews of the field would see culture as a key variable of study, and would invariably include comparative and culture-focused work in their reviews. This would also have the advantage of bringing comparative researchers closer to the mainstream in their use of theory and methodology, as they would be more likely to read work from other parts of the field. It will also require a change in the mind-set of funding agencies, which will need to be more willing to meet the larger budgets that are required to complete high-quality cross-cultural studies that make use of what we now know about organizational communication to make more sophisticated comparisons.

Researchers must find a way to have an impact both on the field of organizational and business communication and on real-life organizational problems. Fortunately, the long traditions of the field may also provide the answer. Specialist journals are already asking researchers to show the implications of their work for practice, and researchers are responding to this demand. What is less clear is whether practitioners are reading these journals, or that the implications drawn by researchers are really relevant to them. Journal editors could play a large role here by engaging with key stakeholders in practice and using their input to set journal agendas and to guide the way implications sections are structured.

In conclusion, the time seems appropriate for cross-cultural perspectives to be incorporated to a much greater extent into organizational communication studies, and for cross- and interdisciplinary theories from psychology, sociology, and political economy (inter alia) to sit alongside the discourse, language, and literary theories that now predominate. Perhaps relevance should be the guiding force for more comparative research in organizational communication over the next few years. The melting pot of theory and method within business communication now needs to be more thoroughly tested in the life of real organizations, taking into account the different backgrounds of the people in them. The past twenty years have widened the scope of theory and methodology in organizational communication, which has been necessary and useful. The utility of these new theories and methods now needs to be exposed to the rigor of more comparative studies that test their usefulness in our globalized world.

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