Developing a Communicative Theory of the Nonprofit

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Organizational communication scholars have a vested interest in developing theoretical perspectives of nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector. As Lewis (2005) points out, several key aspects of the nonprofit sector (e.g., social capital, mission, governance, volunteer relationships, etc.) are inherently communicative and warrant research and theory building that understands and appreciates the complexities of human interaction. What does it mean to take a “communication perspective” toward research and theory building in the nonprofit sector? I argue that it involves placing communication at the foundation of our investigation, developing uniquely communicative explanations for various nonprofit phenomena, and showing how these communicative explanations complement, challenge, and extend existing theoretical frameworks.

This approach would see communication as a distinct mode of explanation (Deetz, 2009), helping to enhance our understanding of various nonprofit phenomena. In addition to studying communication in nonprofit organizations, we should also advance communicative explanations of nonprofit organizations and develop theories that arise from a communicative understanding of

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organizations and human interaction. For example, in addition to studying volunteer communication, we should also develop communicative theories of volunteering; in addition to studying mission statements in nonprofit organizations, we should theorize mission statements from a communication perspective. Though more research on communication phenomena in nonprofit organizations is warranted and welcomed, I believe this alternative approach—developing distinctly communicative theories of nonprofits—is underdeveloped, but the area where we are poised to have substantial impact.

Nonprofits and the Market Economy

At the risk of simplification, most current thinking about the nonprofit sector is dominated by economic theorizing—devoted to explanations of why nonprofit organizations exist and how they function in a market economy. At the macro level, the goal of economic theory is to explain how and why nonprofits provide various goods and services instead of those goods and services being provided by commercial firms or government agencies. This line of thinking tries to explain the existence of nonprofit organizations in response to “failures” of the market, including information asymmetry, lack of perfect competition, and excessive transaction costs; or failures of the government, such as the free-rider problem and the need to ensure political neutrality. Although it may be convenient for economic theorizing to maintain clear distinctions between sectors in a market economy, in reality the boundaries are often blurred: Governments, private businesses, and nonprofits combine to deliver some goods and services, as in the case of hospitals. As Lohmann (2001) argues, “failure theories” distort reality to make nonprofit organizations conform to economic theory, telling us more about what nonprofit organizations are not but saying little about what nonprofits actually are.

Economic theorizing has developed an extensive body of research (for a review, see Ott, 2001) and has played a pivotal role in the scholarly study of the nonprofit sector. Yet economic theories represent only one approach to understanding the nonprofit sector, and assuming the primacy of the market economy to derive theoretical explanations has considerable limitations (see also Dempsey [this issue]). Economic theorizing has been criticized for reducing the complexities of social interaction to a “black box” (Priem & Butler, 2001, p. 33), assuming human behavior is primarily about consuming goods and services and acquiring resources. Economic theories also assume nonprofit organizations exist because markets and governments cannot adequately provide goods and services, implying nonprofits would be unnecessary if the market and state were “perfect.” Finally, and perhaps most importantly,
neither do economic theories tell us much about the actual lived experiences of nonprofit organizations, nor do they do a particularly good job of explaining the processes of organizing.

As the shortcomings of economic theories are conceptually problematic and potential solutions are outside the logics of economic thinking (Kuhn, 2008), to address the limitations of economic theorizing we do not simply need better economic theories. Why not start from different assumptions about the nature of collective experience? If, as Lohmann (2001) points out, the central economic facts of the nonprofit sector are actually “episodes of communicative interaction” (p. 200), then organizational communication scholars should begin articulating distinctly communicative explanations of the nonprofit sector and nonprofit organizations. I suggest three tenets for a communicative theory of the nonprofit, including a focus on (a) lived experiences, (b) language and discourse, and (c) communicative constitution.

A Communicative Theory of the Nonprofit Should Focus on Lived Experiences

Few people experience nonprofit organizations as legal or financial entities, nor can many of the important aspects of the nonprofit sector be reduced to mere economic activity. Much of what constitutes our experience of nonprofit organizations is social, interactive, relational, meaningful—in short, communicative. A communication approach should therefore lead us to think about nonprofits in more phenomenological ways that understand nonprofits based on the lived experiences of relevant stakeholders, not just the status of nonprofits as legal or financial entities. Our theorizing should consider the “lifeworlds” of nonprofits as composed of spatiality (lived space), corporeality (lived body), communality (lived human relationships), and temporality (lived time; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). These existential themes define our lived experiences and shape our ongoing enactments and interpretations of social reality. If we start from the assumption of “nonprofit” as a financial/legal category, then we have already accepted the terms of economic theorizing and are left with studying communication as a phenomenon within these given organizational structures. Instead, what we know and experience as “nonprofit” is a socially constructed concept that is reinforced (or not) through continued patterns of communication.

For example, familiar concepts like “spouse” or “son” certainly have a variety of meanings (biological, legal, psychological, etc.), but they are most commonly experienced socially in our interactions with the representations of those concepts. Likewise, we simply cannot account for the nature of a
nonprofit organization by reading its articles of incorporation or the American tax code, for that is to miss the true character of a nonprofit organization and tells us nothing about what it is like to actually be part of this organization as an employee, volunteer, client, or donor (in the same way that referring to my wife as a Homo sapien or our marriage as a legal contract says virtually nothing about the actual nature of our relationship).

Another important aspect to the lived experience of phenomenological investigation involves the “thing-ness” (Heidegger, 1971), or underlying character, of a particular phenomenon. A phenomenological perspective would try to uncover the “nonprofit-ness” of a particular organization, as experienced through ongoing patterns of interaction and communicative practice. In American culture, “nonprofit” has come to mean more than the financial distribution constraints on a particular organization; it has developed an ethos that implies a particular way of working and relating in society. As Frumkin (2002) explains, the character of the nonprofit sector is rooted in service delivery, social entrepreneurship, civic/political engagement, and even religious faith. These aspects of the nonprofit sector shape the lived experiences of those involved and comprise their social reality.

The key insight from a communication perspective is that these existential qualities are created and sustained through ongoing patterns of interaction and enactment. Therefore, communicative theories of the nonprofit should seek to understand, explain, and direct our attention toward the ways in which existential qualities are constructed and how lived experiences influence a host of relevant social outcomes. For example, Tompkins’s (2009) study of homelessness in Denver, Colorado, demonstrates that homelessness is not primarily an economic problem, but rather a communicative problem resulting from the breakdown of communication networks that provide social capital. By reconceptualizing poverty and homelessness from a communication perspective, Tompkins is able to theorize homeless service providers as organizational links that repair and prevent breakdowns in social capital, thus adding valuable insights to how we think about these nonprofit organizations and the role of communication.

A Communicative Theory of the Nonprofit Should Focus on Language and Discourse

A second tenet that should guide communicative theorizing involves examining the use of language and the discursive constructions that shape our understandings of the nonprofit. Though often taken for granted, terms such as nonprofit, volunteer, faith-based, and mission enable symbolic action
within specific discourse communities and call into being social realities that enable and restrict organizational activity. Communicative explanations of nonprofits should investigate what kinds of social relationships are formed by these terms-in-use, what kinds of identities they produce, and how they serve to structure ongoing modes of engagement in society.

For example, Hilhorst’s (2001) ethnography of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the Philippines demonstrated that the term NGO was best understood as a claim-bearing label that carried with it particular assumptions about legitimacy, identity, and power. In other words, as community workers used the term NGO, they made possible particular modes of development work, assumed particular relations of power, gave themselves particular identities, and so forth. By conceptualizing communication as the production (vs. merely the expression) of meaning, a communicative theory of the nonprofit would provide valuable insights as to how important aspects of the nonprofits sector arise and evolve (e.g., authority, legitimacy, etc.) versus merely explaining that they exist.

**A Communicative Theory of the Nonprofit Should Focus on Communicative Constitution**

A final tenet to guide communicative theorizing involves the constitution of organizational forms vis-à-vis communication processes. The “constitution question” is a fundamental aspect of organizational communication because central to our discipline is the idea that organizational forms should not be taken-for-granted entities, but rather understood as complex social systems of coordination and control that arise and exist within communicative practice. Organizational communication scholars have developed two distinct but related lines of research under the title of communicative constitution of organizations (CCO). First, the “Montreal School” of James Taylor, Francois Cooren, and their colleagues at the Université de Montreal offers an ontology of organization as a textual co-orientation systems. Their work claims that what we experience as “organization” emerges from an ongoing text-conversation dialectic, and is sustained through communicative practices that reify texts and encourage subsequent conversations (see Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009, for a summary of Montreal School CCO theorizing). Kuhn (2008; Kuhn & Ashcraft, 2003) draws from the Montreal School to develop a communicative theory of commercial firms, adding notions of intertextuality, authoritative texts, and ongoing “games” of capital attraction and consent marshaling. In a similar fashion, we could begin articulating a communicative theory of the nonprofit sector or nonprofit organizations based on the
Montreal School ideas of text-conversation dialectics and co-orientated communication. We could theorize about the textual and conversational practices that constitute nonprofit organizations and the sector as a whole, showing how localized interaction contains the seeds of organizational constitution and the emergence of higher order systems that enable and constrain collective action.

A second approach to CCO theorizing is that of McPhee and colleagues’ four flows model of organizational constitution (McPhee & Iverson, 2009; McPhee & Zaug, 2000). Based on ideas from structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), this approach sees organizations composed of four message flows: self-structuring, membership negotiation, activity coordination, and institutional positioning (see Putnam & Nicotera, 2009 for a summary of four flows CCO theorizing). Although McPhee’s work is widely cited, there are only a handful of empirical studies that actually engage their work and make a substantive contribution to this line of CCO theorizing. One exception is the work of Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2008) who use the four flows model to explain the communicative constitution of a nonprofit women’s community center as an “employee abusive organization.” They also introduce a fifth flow—syncretic superstructure—to account for the macrosystem of meanings from which organizations emerge and exist within. Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2008) demonstrate how we can use CCO theorizing to articulate organizational constitution based on patterns of interaction (e.g., employee abuse) instead of just economic categories. Although CCO approaches are not particular to nonprofit organizations, they offer a conceptual foundation from which to advance communicative explanations of nonprofit organizing.

To summarize, I am suggesting that communication theorizing of the nonprofit focus on lived experiences, language and discourse, and communicative constitution. Though not exhaustive, these are areas where organizational communication scholars bring a distinct approach to the table and are poised to make important contributions to our understanding of nonprofit organizations and the nonprofit sector. Deetz and Putnam (2001) claim that the field of communication needs to articulate a unique mode of explanation to contribute effectively to interdisciplinary research, and this certainly applies to organizational communication scholarship and the nonprofit sector. I have tried to demonstrate why it is that communicative theorizing about the nonprofit sector is important, not only to advance communication scholarship but also to enhance our understanding of this important realm of organizational activity. My goal in this forum essay is to provide theoretical tenets to guide this work and offer suggestions to provoke further conversation. Can we
develop distinctively communicative theories of nonprofit organizations and
the nonprofit sector? I think we can and should, and I invite others to join in
this important task.

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