

CHAPTER 11

Power

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POWER AND CONFLICT: CONNECTED AND SEPARATE PHENOMENA

We began this text with the simple observation that organizations are constituted through communication. The constitutive function of communication, however, depends on the manner in which it is used to exercise one of the most pervasive phenomenon in organizational life—power. Russell (1983) claims that power is the fundamental concept in the social sciences, analogous to the place of energy in physics. W. Charles Redding (1985) expressed the importance of power in organizational life quite neatly, though somewhat grimly, during some informal comments to members of the International Communication Association’s organizational communication division. “We must not forget,” said Redding,

“that organizations run on subservience.” Subservience means being submissive or acting as a servant. Consequently, organizational power is tied to status.

TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF STATUS AND POWER

In hierarchically structured organizations, differences in members' status and power are a simple fact of life. These differences, in large part, create the “top to bottom” character of contemporary organizations. Even within groups, different members are accorded varying degrees of power and status. Just as some members of a group have more power and status than others, some groups within an organization have more prestige and are better able to exert influence than other groups.

Status refers essentially to the rank or importance of one's position in a group. Traditionally, power has been regarded as any means or resource that one person may employ to gain compliance and cooperation from others (Secord & Backman, 1964). As Dahl (1957) expressed it, power is the capacity of actor A to get actor B to do what actor B would not otherwise do. Traditional views of power also recognize that it involves the ability to control the agenda or plan of action in a situation and to suppress issues in discussions and decision making that would pose a challenge or create controversy (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). Status and power should not be regarded as traits that are inherent in a particular position. Generally, it is more appropriate to think of status and power as conditions that other members of the group accord to a person in a given position. The two conditions are closely related. The ability to exercise power enhances status; status enhances the ability to exercise power.

Types of Power

Status distinctions facilitate the use of power by people in higher positions to secure compliance from those in lower positions. In part, the power that actor A has over actor B is determined by B's dependence on A (Emerson, 1962). Status distinctions create barriers that reduce the dependency of those in higher positions on those in lower positions. Such barriers help to maintain a power difference that favors the higher position.

French and Raven (1959) provided an analysis of social power that has become a classic model for classifying the forms of power applied in organizational relationships. They described five basic types of power: reward, coercive, referent, expert, and legitimate.

Reward and coercive power are closely related. The former involves the ability to control and apply rewards, either directly or indirectly, whereas the latter involves the ability to control and apply punishments. One's reward or coercive power over others depends on at least two factors. First, those things that can be controlled or mediated (e.g., salary increases, promotions, work assignments, demotions, suspensions, terminations) must be perceived as rewards or punishments by others. Second, a person has these forms of power only to the extent that he or she is perceived as being willing and able to apply or at least mediate rewards and punishments. As Secord and Backman (1964)

observed, “If a supervisor has seldom rewarded or punished an employee, either directly or indirectly, his reward and coercive power is likely to be weak” (p. 275).

Referent power depends on identification. Identification sometimes is defined as the desire to be like another person. In this sense, actor A has referent power with actor B to the extent that B wishes to be like A. The concepts of identification and referent power, however, are somewhat more complex. According to Kelman (1961), identification involves a desirable, satisfying, and self-defining relationship with another person or group. Consequently, a given individual or group has referent power with a person to the extent that this person engages in certain behaviors because these behaviors maintain the relationship or the definition of self that is anchored in the relationship. One form of identification occurs when one person literally models another’s behavior. A second form involves different but complementary behaviors. Identification also occurs when a person adopts the attitudes and values of a self-defining group.

Expert power is based on the perception that a person possesses some special knowledge that is required to solve a problem, perform a task, or decide on a course of action. A person wields expert power with others if they follow his or her course of action in the belief that the individual knows more than they do about what should be done in the situation.

Legitimate power is based on acceptance of internal norms and values regarding authority and the right to exercise authority. People accept influence from someone in a certain position because they believe this person has the right to exercise the authority accorded to that position. For example, a company president might create a team leader position for a project group and decree that the position has certain status and powers. Functionally, however, status and power depend on group members’ acceptance. In other words, the team leader exercises legitimate power only to the extent that team members accept the leader’s authority to exercise controls over the members’ behavior.

Dimensions of Power

The work of Max Weber is central to any study of power in organizations. Weber (1978) focused on describing and analyzing the system of rationality that is such an obvious part of Western industrial society. More specifically, he examined the system of rationality that operates within bureaucracies. As Mumby (2001) explained

Weber . . . left us with both a structural and ideological legacy: a bureaucratic system of rules and regulations constitutive of authority, along with an ideology of rationality that shapes and constrains the behavior of actors in organizational contexts. (p. 587)

Although Weber viewed bureaucratic rationality as a key feature of Western society, he expressed concerns with its practice and its potential to overshadow other forms of rationality such as the charismatic, which he viewed “as an essential, magical feature of human collective action” (Mumby, 2001, p. 587). In his description of Western society, Weber presented us with an “ideal type” of rational legal authority. He saw the ideal type of authority as firmly linked to technical criteria and expertise. In other words, authority structures human action with clear rules so employees know exactly how to act in any situation. The problem with

this system, however, is as it reproduces itself through communication among organization members it may create an “iron cage” that traps those it was intended to empower.

As scholars debated Weber’s views from the 1950s through the 1970s, they attempted to gain an understanding of the structure and distribution of power in organizations. In what was termed the “community power debate,” two camps developed: the pluralists (Dahl, 1957, 1958, 1961; Wolfinger, 1971) and the elitists (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, 1963; Hunter, 1953; Mills, 1956). The pluralists believed that power was distributed equitably in society and that there was no “ruling elite” who controlled decision-making processes. Elitists, on the other hand, believed that power was concentrated in the hands of the privileged.

Dahl’s (1957) one-dimensional model of power focuses on the rational, causal, and behavioral aspects of power as they relate to decision making. As he stated, “A has the power over B to the extent that he [or she] can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (pp. 202–203). By defining power in this way, Dahl concentrates on the “manifest *exercise* of power, and not on power as a potential or dispositional quality of actors” (Mumby, 2001, p. 588). Also central to his perspective is the belief that power is exercised only in decision-making situations in which parties hold opposing views.

Bachrach and Baratz (1962) did not disagree with Dahl’s view that power was displayed in decision-making situations; however, they believed that power had another face. Specifically, they argued that power is also displayed when certain individuals are able to control communication so the political process is restricted to issues that serve only to reinforce their power. As Bachrach and Baratz (1962) explain, “To the extent that A succeeds in doing this, B is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to A’s set of preferences” (p. 948).

Lukes’s (1974) three-dimensional model of power identifies shortcomings with both Dahl’s one-dimensional model and Bachrach and Baratz’s two-dimensional model. Lukes’s criticism is that both models focus on power only in decision making or conflict situations; instead, he argues that power may be displayed in the absence of decision making or conflict. In this sense, power resides in the “socially structured and culturally patterned behavior of groups and practices of institution” (Lukes, 1974, p. 22). From the traditional viewpoint, power may be the ability of actor A to get actor B to do what B otherwise would not do. But, in Lukes’s model, there is nothing quite so powerful as the assumption within a group that things are or should be a particular way. As Lukes observed, it is “the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have . . . to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires” (p. 23).

The community power debate that we outlined in this section shows how scholars have wrestled with understanding how power functions in organizational settings. This debate provided us with insight into “how to move beyond individual and relationally focused conceptions of power” (Mumby, 2001, p. 589).

Resource Dependency

In their coalition model of power, Pfeffer and Salancik focus on the extent to which organizational subunits are dependent on resources provided by other social actors (Pfeffer, 1981; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974, 1978; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1974, 1977). From their perspective, organizational decision making is a political process that can be understood by examining the relative power of the various subunits in the organization. This is more than a matter of who

gets what resources. Rather, the key issue is how dependent is a given unit on the resources provided by other actors or units. There are many different types of resources that organizational subunits need; some of the most important are money, prestige, legitimacy, rewards and sanctions, expertise, and the ability to deal with uncertainty (Mumby, 2001).

The more dependent a unit is on resources provided by others, the more important communication is with those resource providers. Specifically, to obtain needed resources a subunit within the organization must engage in transactions with other subunits. The nature of the transaction will vary on the basis of the reason for requesting the resource. Among the most common types of transactions will be simple requests, justifications for needed resources, and offers of resource exchange. In explaining how we may use communication to enhance power and gain resources, Pfeffer (1981) explains:

The view developed here . . . is that language and symbolism are important in the *exercise* of power. It is helpful for social actors with power to use appropriate political language and symbols to legitimate and develop support for the decisions that are reached on the basis of power. However, in this formulation, language and the ability to use political symbols contributes only marginally to the development of the power of various organizational participants; rather, power derives from the conditions of resource control and resource interdependence. (p. 184, emphasis in original)

Pfeffer's perspective clearly considers the role of communication in gaining needed resources, but he falls short of giving communication a central role. Instead, communication plays a secondary or supplemental role. This is substantially different from the interpretive and critical views of power that we will consider shortly in which communication constitutes power relations. Simply stated, Pfeffer views communication as serving the purpose of reproducing and legitimizing already-existing power relations within the organization.

INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVES ON POWER

The starting point in taking an interpretive perspective on power is recognizing that communication is constitutive of organizing (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Putnam, 1983; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987). What this means is that organization members collectively construct a shared reality through communication (Mumby, 2001). In order to create this shared reality, we need to understand the notion of *intersubjectivity*, which requires us to break from the Cartesian model of subject-object separation. Specifically, Descartes believed that knowledge is the mind's discovery of a preexisting reality. The shift to an interpretive perspective requires that we view "communication [as] the process of creating an intersubjectively meaningful reality" (Mumby, 2001, p. 593). And, as Gadamer (1960/1989) explains, it is through language that we create the self, meaning, and the world as we know it. So, the displays of power we see and the power relations that are present in all organizations are created through communication among organization members. Importantly, changes in how people communicate with one another will also affect the nature of power dynamics within an organization.

The interpretive approach on power focuses on the relationships that exist among communication, power, and meaning (Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979). For example,

Grameen Bank field workers do not only act in the organization's interests, they develop a sense of identity through committing themselves to the organization and its goals, even if it means working 12–14 hours a day, seven days a week (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995, 1997). The identifications and commitments of the field workers are not developed without problems, however. In fact, there are struggles over meaning. For example, some field workers question how much sacrifice is too much, and some administrators of the bank disapprove when field workers work alongside loan recipients whose businesses are struggling. At the same time, these administrators pressure the field workers to keep their loan repayment levels high. Such struggles do not prevent the construction of a shared reality; rather, they point to the difficulties organization members face when creating an intersubjectively meaningful reality.

Farmer (1999) studied the culture of a mining community in southwestern Virginia by asking community members to describe events surrounding a 1989 miner's strike. One dimension of power relations that was revealed in this study was how "replacement workers" were viewed and described in the community. Replacement worker was the term used by the Pittston Mining Corporation to refer to workers who crossed the picket line to replace the unionized miners during the strike. One of Farmer's interviewees talked about how these workers were described in the community:

I did not feel sorry for the quote unquote replacement workers, but let's call them what they are, scabs. Scabs. And in this area, someone can call you the vilest of obscenities, and you'll pretty much take it and go on, but someone calls you a scab, you don't get any lower than that. Because a scab not only takes your job, your livelihood, they're taking food out of your family. It's despicable. And that's what a quote unquote replacement worker is, the lowest, the very lowest. (Farmer, 1999, p. 184)

In this mining community, a single word separated the reviled from the accepted member. A person who crossed the picket line, even if his excuse was to feed his own family, was the lowest of all human beings. Being called a scab marked that person permanently. Such a person could never return to a position of respect and acceptance in the community. Thus, with a single word a person's place in the community is identified and they are completely disempowered.

POWER IN THE VIEW OF CRITICAL THEORY

Traditional theories of power have tried to describe the forms of power that occur in social processes and have emphasized social exchange explanations for the operation of power. The result is an appealing—but somewhat sterile—view of power that fails to account for the connection between power and communication and ignores the dark side of the subservience to which Redding called attention.

Peter J. Frost (1987), a prominent professor of industrial relations at the University of British Columbia, has advanced four propositions about power that are not explicit in traditional treatments of the concept:

1. Organizational life is significantly influenced by the quest for and exercise of power by organizational actors, which constitute the political activity of organization.
2. Power exists both on the surface level of organizational activity and deep within the very structure of organizations.
3. Communication plays a vital role in the development of power relations and the exercise of power.
4. The manipulation and exercise of power is expressed, in the sense both of actions and relations, as organizational games. (p. 504)

Frost points out that communication provides the means for the development and exercise of power. In turn, power creates and shapes communication structure and rules. With respect to power and politics, “the communication medium is never neutral” (p. 507).

Critical theory focuses explicitly on a communicative and symbolic approach to power. For the critical theorist, power is inextricably tied to domination and oppression—conditions in the structure of society and in organizations that scholars should reveal and criticize. But critical theory does something that goes beyond mere complaining about societal oppression. As Dennis Mumby (1987) explained, it attempts to show how symbolism can “potentially legitimate dominant forms of organizational reality . . . restricting the interpretations and meanings that can be attached to organizational activity” (p. 113).

Power and Legitimation

Critical theory has its roots in the works of Marx, but real development and articulation of modern critical theory began in Germany during the 1930s at the University of Frankfurt’s Institute for Social Research, known more simply as “The Frankfurt School” (Farrell & Aune, 1979). Whatever Marx’s original notions about history and society, Soviet-style communism had refined Marxist theory into a purely materialistic philosophy. Like the early machine metaphor of traditionalism, materialism reduced explanations for social process to machinelike causal relations that were divorced from questions of human consciousness and values. The Frankfurt School aimed at creating a form of neo-Marxism that addressed dominance and oppression in terms of values and morals (McGann, 1983). Since the 1960s, this effort has been best reflected in the works of Jürgen Habermas (1968, 1976/1979). Lee McGann (1983) clearly explains the difference between traditional Marxism and Habermas’s brand of neo-Marxism:

The traditional Marxist argument is that the West will fall as a result of economic collapse brought on by an uncontrollable cycle of inflation and recession. This will lead to class consciousness by workers and bring the revolution. Habermas has shown that . . . the real source of difficulty for capitalistic societies involves problems of **legitimation** [emphasis added] . . . the crisis faced by institutions in the West comes from challenges to the legitimacy of power and function of capitalistic structures. . . .

What Habermas did in developing the concept of a legitimation crisis was to shift the traditional Marxist critique of society from the positivistic and material to

the conceptual and moral. Critical theory in this light looks not at the economic relations undergirding social institutions. Instead, it focuses on the conceptual structures that justify the existence of institutions and the relation of those legitimations to real human interests. (p. 5)

In fact, because Western capitalism has managed to remain more or less intact despite the doomsaying of traditional Marxist theory, one of the more interesting issues addressed in modern critical theory concerns why this has happened. Although dominance can be achieved through force and coercion, and force and coercion are not unusual in organizations, the maintenance of power in capitalist organizations depends in large part on its legitimation (i.e., the manner in which its use is justified and accepted). Thus, as Robert McPhee (1985) pointed out, some of the most prominent examples of modern critical research “concentrate on a single question: how is it, given the alienated and exploitative nature of work in capitalist organizations, that workers cooperate with management, labor at their jobs, and forego resistant stances, without the constant presence of coercion and threat?” (p. 1).

Power and Organizational Structure

In an effort to answer this question, critical theory focuses on the intricate relationships between power and organizational structure. The idea of organizational structure in critical theory is not quite the same thing as the traditionalist concepts that we presented in Chapter 3. There, we considered structure in terms of formally designated lines of authority and divisions of labor and in terms of communication networks. But you may also remember the basic definition of a *system* that we presented in Chapter 5; namely, it is a set of elements and the *rules* that define the relationships among those elements. Structure is realized through these rules, and this is the concept of structure with which critical theory is concerned.

What is the relationship between structure and power? As explained by Stewart Clegg (1975), power arises from the **deep structure rules** of organization and is achieved by controlling those rules. Deep structure rules include shared, unquestioned assumptions that guide our social actions. The organizational rule system provides what Clegg characterizes as a “mode of rationality” by shaping and directing the ways in which we think and act. When we internalize this mode of rationality, we act only in ways that support the organizational rule system because we believe that “that’s the way things are around here.”

Mumby and Stohl (1991) also address the issue of power structures, but their approach is somewhat different than Clegg’s. They argue that within organizations there are struggles between different interest groups “to create a meaning system in which certain views of the world are privileged over others” (p. 318). The dominant group is the one that is best able to create and sustain a meaning system that serves its own interests. More specifically, Mumby and Stohl claim that discourse (e.g., conversations, written interaction) functions to structure systems of *presence* and *absence* within the organization, meaning that certain views of what is acceptable within the organization are organized into everyday practices, whereas other alternative views are organized out (or absented). For example, in most organizations members are expected to make decisions according to rational procedures intended to produce optimal outcomes. Within such organizations, “rationality is given

primacy (made present) over emotionality (absented) as a legitimate model of organizational experience” (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p. 319; also see Mumby & Putnam, 1992).

Power, Symbols, and Systematic Distortion

Obviously, different rule systems provide us with different ways of organizing our behavior. In Chapter 2, we described how domination occurs in organizations by focusing on the concepts of **hegemony** and **systemically distorted communication**. By returning to these two concepts and extending our analysis of them, we can gain further insight into how power relations are sustained through symbols and distorted communication.

In organizations, hegemony may be legitimized through systematically distorted communication in various ways, but systematic distortion in its most basic form can be found in the political functions of organizational **ideology**. As we explained earlier, an ideology is a set of assumptions and beliefs that constitute a system of thought. Ideology provides the structure for an organization’s mode of rationality. In other words, ideology is central to an organization’s deep structure. Giddens (1979) contends that ideology functions politically in three ways to privilege the interests of one group over another. A concise summary of Giddens’s claims is adapted from Mumby (1987):

1. *Representing sectional interests as universal.* Although the real organization may consist of competing constituencies and conflicting interests (e.g., management versus labor, staff versus line), ideology can tell us “We’re all in this together” (i.e., that the interests of one group really are the interests of all).

2. *Denying or transmuted contradictions.* From the vantage point of critical theory, capitalist society and organizations within capitalist society are fraught with fundamental contradictions. The ownership of the means for producing goods and services is private, yet, in organizations, the production is accomplished through a social process. Ideology can obscure the fundamental nature of these contradictions by making them appear to be nothing more than social conflict. Thus, ideology tells us that decision making is purely rational, when, in fact, it is political, or that we are “all equal here,” when, in fact, we are not.

3. *Naturalizing the present through reification.* In effect, reification means that we make a socially constructed reality appear to be concrete (i.e., objective, fixed, and immutable). Ideology reifies meaning by telling us, “This is the way things are.” As we pointed out in earlier chapters, the most obvious example of this probably is the concept of organizational hierarchy itself. It is taken to be concrete and is literally the natural order of things, but it has its existence only in shared meanings which shape our actions to fit the idea.

Mumby has added a fourth function, *control*, to Giddens’s list of three. Perhaps the control function already is implied in Giddens’s list, but Mumby wants to make it clear that ideological control is not so much a matter of one group’s domination over another as it is the ability of a group or class to make the interests of other groups appear to be consistent with its own. We think it is also important to specifically connect Mumby’s idea of control with systematically distorted communication. *Members of dominated groups participate in their own oppression through self-deception by identifying with and actively consenting to the*

system of hegemony. When this occurs, we have, as Gramsci (1971) suggested, the condition under which hegemony works best.

One of us was involved in a consulting project with a large accounting and investment firm in which we were able to observe firsthand how employees can participate in their own oppression through self-deception. In this firm, there were three women who had reached the rank of partner (out of 21 total partners). Two of the women, who had young children at home, realized that they could no longer meet the demands of heavy workloads that often resulted in 60-hour workweeks. They felt that their children's needs were being sacrificed so the firm could continue to make money. After presenting their concerns to the other partners, they struck a deal in which the women were able to reduce their workweek to an average of 30 hours. Of course, with the reduction in hours came a 40% reduction in their share of the firm's profits. At first glance, it may seem that these women had struck a good deal. But did they really? Another way of interpreting their actions is to argue that they accepted without question the fact that partners must work 60 hours a week in order to retain full partner status. Couldn't the women have posed other questions, such as "Why do we have to work 60 hours a week to retain partner status?" or "Can't we promote more accountants or investment analysts to partner status so we can reduce the workload for all of us?" Unfortunately, these women struck a deal that was based on their unquestioned acceptance of what a fair workload is for partners. If they had questioned these beliefs about a fair workload, perhaps they could have negotiated a 40-hour workweek, retained full partner status, and spent more time with their children.

Communication Distortion in Organizational Hierarchies

Communication distortion may occur in organizations in ways that preserve power for certain groups and reduce the power available to other groups. One way of looking at communication distortion is considering how it is used at different levels of an organization's hierarchy. There may be incentives for subordinates to distort messages that reveal negative information about individual or departmental performance. The reason the message is distorted is to prevent or delay criticism or punishment from management for poor performance. For example, let's say that a sales manager for a retail store experienced a quarterly decline in sales for a particular line of clothing. The honest explanation for the decline was an error in inventory management. Specifically, the sales manager did not stock an adequate inventory of this line of clothing. When asked to account for the decline in sales, however, the sales manager cites increased competition from other retailers in the area and a slight increase in the county's unemployment rate, which decreased consumer's disposable income. If upper management accepts the explanation, the store manager avoids criticism or punishment for a mistake that he made. A number of years ago, Sussman (1973) wrote an article describing this general phenomenon as "you can fool some of the supervisors some of the time."

Upper management may also choose to distort communication to preserve power for itself and restrict power from subordinates. *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005), a documentary film produced and directed by Robert Greenwald, explains the retail giant's use of communication distortion in great detail. For example, Wal-Mart pays its sales associates in the United States so poorly that many full-time workers need to seek social

welfare assistance to pay for food and access healthcare and low-cost subsidized housing. In fact, applying Wal-Mart's reported percentages of workers and children enrolled in Medicaid and other state-supported health programs implies that Wal-Mart workers and children cost taxpayers \$456 million nationally through their use of public health programs (Jacobs & Dube, 2004). This is just one part of the cost to U.S. taxpayers, however. There are also costs associated with offering free or reduced-price lunches to children of Wal-Mart employees, housing assistance, tax cuts for low-income families, and low-income energy assistance. When all of these costs are added together, Wal-Mart costs U.S. taxpayers approximately \$1.5 billion per year (Miller, 2004).

One type of information distortion that Wal-Mart employs with its sales associates is to broadcast on closed-circuit television in employee break rooms a program that describes the disadvantages of unionization. Employees are told that all that unions do is take money out of workers' paychecks for dues without increasing wages or improving benefits. This programming serves to discourage employees from forming unions. Of course, the company fails to inform their employees that Wal-Mart stores are unionized in Germany, where employees are paid a living wage, provided with a free healthcare program, and given 30 days of vacation a year. By distorting information on the closed-circuit telecast in U.S. stores concerning unionization, Wal-Mart saves more than \$19 billion a year in additional payroll costs. This estimate comes from comparisons between the average wage of unionized workers in the United States (\$760 per week) and the average wage of Wal-Mart workers (\$263 per week) (Miller, 2004). Clearly, information distortion pays huge dividends for this corporation.

Limits of Ideological Manipulation

Advocates of the theory of hegemony as we have described it so far contend that power in organizations works through *ideological manipulation* (Witten, 1993). What this means is that the dominant group manipulates and structures the interests of the oppressed group. This manipulation is accomplished through convincing the oppressed group that their interests can best be served by adhering to the values and behaviors the dominant group advocates.

Although the concept of ideological manipulation is linked to some critical theorists, other theorists criticize this perspective. Specifically, Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1980) observe that ideological manipulation is predicated on the Marxist notion of *false consciousness*. False consciousness refers to a condition in which the less powerful members of a social system ignorantly subscribe to the dominant control of more powerful members. The less powerful members accept this control because they uncritically accept the positions advocated by the dominant group as being in their best interests.

One good reason for discomfort with the notion of false consciousness is its contradiction of Giddens's (1979) description of the *dialectic of control*. As you'll remember from Chapter 9, Giddens argued that every social actor within a system has the capacity to exercise power and control. Hancox and Papa (1996) and Gibson and Papa (2000) reported an interesting example of the dialectic of control in action. They conducted their studies in a manufacturing organization that uses a monetary incentive system to reward employees for high levels of performance. The "bonus pay" high performers receive comes out of annual company profits. The positive side of this incentive system is that the employees are paid at rates three times higher than the average for workers in U.S. manufacturing companies.

The negative side of this system is that the employees sometimes have to work six or seven days a week to meet production goals. The pressure to produce at high levels also creates equipment hazards that have resulted in severed fingers, burns, and eye injuries.

Given the preceding description, how do employees within this manufacturing organization exhibit control over management? Recently, the company operated at a financial loss because of poor performance from subsidiaries located in Europe. Certain managers within the company began to float the rumor that bonuses would not be paid because of the financial loss. Worker reaction to this rumor was emotional and forceful. For example, many employees indicated that violence would erupt if the bonus was not paid and that the majority of the laborers would quit their jobs. As one employee with 30 years' experience stated, "People think that maybe somebody's gonna come in here with a gun if he doesn't like what he hears [on bonus day]" (Hancox & Papa, 1996, p. 22). Echoing this sentiment, an employee with 29 years' experience explained that too many of the employees rely on the bonus to pay their everyday bills. So, if a particular employee does not receive the bonus he expects, "this might break this guy and he's likely to come in with a autoloader on bonus day and wipe everybody out" (p. 23). Finally, dealing with the issue of a massive walkout, an employee with 26 years' experience explained, "The average worker would walk out because they would find it very difficult to justify their presence there. They would probably lose 40% of their employees immediately" (p. 22).

What was management's response to these worker statements? Well, despite the fact that bonuses had never before been paid when the company lost money, the owners borrowed \$50 million in 1993 so they could still provide performance bonuses to qualifying employees. Of course it is difficult to prove that management's decision to take out the loan was due solely to worker statements. However, a case can be made that these statements had their intended impact. As one worker with 29 years' experience put it, "That bonus keeps all your good workers here, and keeps people from leaving. That is the reason they borrow money to pay the bonus" (Hancox & Papa, 1996, p. 24).

As the above example shows, employees have the ability to empower themselves even in organizations in which managers attempt to engage in ideological manipulation. Does this mean that workers are always aware of management's attempts to manipulate them? Of course, this claim cannot be made either. Sometimes management is successful in its attempts to manipulate workers, and other times workers realize what is going on and empower themselves. In still other instances, workers recognize that they are being manipulated but decide that the rewards associated with continued organizational membership outweigh the costs of continued manipulation. So, within organizations power and structure are related but the nature of that relationship is sometimes more complex than it seems at first glance.

Critical Theory in Organizational Communication Research

Critical theory has produced some outstanding studies of power in work and organizational settings (e.g., Burawoy, 1979; Clegg, 1975; Edwards, 1979), but it has begun only recently to exert influence in the study of organizational communication. One good example of this kind of research is a study by Mumby on the political use of *narratives*, literally, the use of storytelling in organizations. Mumby examined a story that purportedly was widely

disseminated in IBM Corporation and that was told and retold by many members of this company. The story concerns an incident between IBM's chairman, Thomas Watson, Jr., and an IBM employee named Lucille Burger. Although the exact form and content of the story might vary somewhat from one telling to another, the basic form published by Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin (1983) goes this way:

Lucille Burger, a twenty-two-year-old bride weighing ninety pounds, whose husband had been sent overseas, had been given a job until his return. The young woman was obliged to make certain that people entering security areas wore the correct clear identification. Surrounded by his usual entourage of white-shirted men, Watson approached the doorway to an area where she was on guard, wearing an orange badge acceptable elsewhere in the plant, but not a green badge, which alone permitted entrance at her door. "I was trembling in my uniform, which was far too big," she recalled. "It hid my shakes, but not my voice. 'I'm sorry,' I said to him. I knew who he was alright. 'You cannot enter. Your admittance is not recognized.' That's what we were supposed to say." The men accompanying Watson were stricken; the moment held unpredictable possibilities. "Don't you know who he is?" someone hissed. Watson raised his hand for silence, while one of the party strode off and returned with the appropriate badge. (pp. 439–440)

Mumby demonstrates how this story can plausibly accomplish all of the political functions of ideology—how the story is, in effect, an instance of systematically distorted communication. Although every statement in the story may be factually correct, the story nonetheless obscures and mystifies the actual conditions of organizational life at IBM.

As interpreted by Mumby (1987), the story implies that sectional interests are transcended by rules that are designed for the benefit of all, but it obscures the fact that the rules are "created by the corporate elite (of which Watson is head) to protect their own interests" (p. 121). The rules at issue in this story "are in place for the benefit of people like Watson, and not for people like Lucille Burger" (p. 121). Moreover, the story denies a fundamental contradiction and is, itself, a contradiction. It portrays Watson as an ordinary person who must obey Burger in her official capacity as an enforcer of the rules, yet also makes him "a larger-than-life figure about whom fables are told" (p. 122). More to the point, it is the fact that Watson really *is* an exception that makes the story compelling. Watson wisely used the occasion to make a dramatic statement about corporate rules by deferring to a relatively low-echelon employee. In fact, he could have walked right by Burger without any consequences at all.

Mumby argues that this story provides a very good instance of reification simply because it can be recounted over and over again as a statement not only about rules, but also about the rationale for enforcing them, not to mention latent statements about sex roles and status differences. In particular, Mumby says, "The story serves to reify ideologically the organizational rule system itself. . . . Lucille Burger's single-minded adherence to the rules reflects not so much a heightened sense of corporate loyalty, but rather an enforcing of the rules *because they exist*" (p. 123). Finally, the story serves the control function because it is recounted not only by high-level executives, but throughout the company as "an example of 'intellectual and moral leadership'" (p. 123). The story itself is actively recounted by

employees, and they actively take up and adopt its ideology. Its illustration of Burger's commitment to the system is identified and equated with the legitimacy and appropriateness of that system.

Mumby's study of the Watson-Burger story suggests three goals for critical scholarship, which are adapted from Deetz (1982):

1. *Richer understanding of naturally occurring events.* Deep structure elements of meaning are largely taken for granted. They shape our actions without much conscious reflection, examination, or questioning. Critical research attempts to produce insights not only for scholars, but also for organization members themselves by calling attention to the deep structure of meaning systems. This is similar to the idea of "consciousness-raising."

2. *Criticism of false consensus.* When we deceive ourselves through systematically distorted communication, the result is false consensus. As Deetz expresses it, false consensus "is reached by the power of definition rather than open discussion" (p. 140). If illusions and the conditions that make them necessary can be overcome, it is possible to have open dialogue among different organizational groups and constituencies. Returning to Habermas, the task of the critical theorist is to identify and criticize strategic action in order to move toward communicative action in society.

3. *Expansion of the conceptual base from which organization members think and work.* Organization members need to learn how to engage in communicative action in order to have a better understanding of organizational life and to expand their concepts and languages in order to grapple creatively with the problems that confront them.

In Chapter 6, we described systems of concertive control in organizations. Studies focusing on such systems have yielded interesting insights into the nature of power in organizations (Barker, 1993; Barker & Cheney, 1994; Papa et al., 1995, 1997). In order to understand how power operates within concertive control systems, we need to return to two concepts we discussed in Chapter 6: *identification* and *discipline*. As you will remember, workers exhibit their identification with an organization when, in making a decision, they perceive the organization's values or interests as relevant in evaluating the alternatives of choice (Tompkins & Cheney, 1983). Such worker perceptions lead to the conclusion, "What's good for the organization is also good for me." In addition, in systems of concertive control, workers show their identification with the organization and their work team by establishing and sustaining disciplinary techniques that allow workers to accomplish goals that they have created for themselves. These disciplinary techniques act as a powerful social force that governs and regulates worker behavior. In order to clarify how discipline acts as a powerful social force in organizations, let's turn to an example Papa et al. (1995) report in their study of Grameen Bank workers:

Atiqar Rahman is a Grameen bank field worker who works on the outskirts of Dhaka [Bangladesh]. He told us about the pressure he feels from fellow field workers to retain a high loan recovery rate. When he experienced problems with loan recovery in a particular center (four members had ceased loan repayment), he felt personally responsible to solve the problem. The four members had taken out a loan for a rickshaw repair business. However, they soon discovered that they

could not compete with the more established repair businesses in Dhaka. Rahman met with the non-paying members and attempted to persuade them to resume loan repayment. When that did not work he offered to help them move their business to an area where they could compete. Rahman eventually wound up working on rickshaw repairs himself to help the loan recipients keep their business functioning. (pp. 208–209)

In interpreting this story, Papa et al. noted that the loan repayment records of Rahman's centers were posted on a wall behind his desk for all the other field workers to see. Rahman felt incredible guilt when he returned to the branch office at the end of a long day without having received any loan repayments from the delinquent borrowers. He felt that he was failing as a field worker, and he became most upset when he compared his loan recovery record to the posted records of his coworkers. He even considered quitting his job because he felt incapable of meeting the high standards his coworkers had established.

Why did Rahman identify so strongly with the standards his coworkers established? First of all, he was part of establishing the standards. Second, sustaining these high standards allows the Grameen Bank to sustain its position as one of the most successful social and economic development organizations in the world. Rahman felt that he was part of this success until experiencing problems with loan recovery in one of his bank centers. Third, discipline acts as a social force in the Grameen Bank because of the carefully designed system of monitoring and evaluating worker performance. Papa et al. (1997) explain this system as follows:

The monitoring and evaluation of worker performance became particularly clear to us in the branch offices when field workers returned from their village centers. Although exhausted from a long day's work, bank workers would begin counting and recording loan repayments as soon as they sat down at their desks. Each member counted the money in full view of the other branch members and the branch manager. The pace of the counting and recording operations is fast and clearly stressful. As we learned in talking with a number of field workers, the stress they feel is linked to the immediacy of the evaluation they receive. Lagging performance is quickly discovered and corrected, and good performance is quickly rewarded. (p. 20)

Papa et al. note that the counting of loan repayments at the end of the day is similar to Foucault's (1975/1979) threefold disciplinary mechanism: *examination*, *hierarchical observation*, and *normalizing judgment*. The public counting of loan repayments is a form of daily examination for the workers. Hierarchical observation occurs as the counting of the money is performed in full view of the manager. The manager and the coworkers then offer a normalizing judgment in the feedback given to the worker about his or her performance. Workers who collect all outstanding loan repayments are praised. Those who fail to recoup all outstanding loan repayments are criticized and made to feel unworthy to be a teammate. Thus, the punishment workers receive is essentially communicative in form. Field workers criticize each other and make reference to the loan repayment records posted behind workers' desks. In order to avoid this criticism and prove their strong identification with the bank's continued success, the workers labor long hours and forgo vacations to ensure that members continue their loan repayments. Finally, Papa et al. (1997) explain that the workers accept these forms of discipline because of their strong identification with the bank.

As one Grameen Bank worker, Shamsul Hoque, put it: “I feel like the engine of change. An engine that gets its fuel from the vision of Muhammad Yunus [Grameen’s Managing Director] and water from the dreams of the poor and the landless” (p. 19).

Thus, in concertive control systems power is embedded within a system of interaction among workers who identify strongly with an organization and its goals. What this means is that workers communicate with one another in ways that sustain the disciplinary system so continued goal attainment is possible. Instead of a form of power in which a dominant group (e.g., management) enforces discipline upon workers, a concertive control system empowers workers to be their own enforcers. Because the workers themselves create the system of control, they are committed to sustaining it despite the personal sacrifices entailed in continued organizational participation.

Reconceptualizing Power

In the first decade of the 21st century, we continue to struggle with our understanding of power relations in organizations and how communication intersects with power. Although there are many emerging perspectives that inform our current thinking, two stand out in particular: feminisms and poststructuralism.

Feminisms

In viewing power from a broad range of feminist perspectives (see Chapter 14), the first recognition that seems important is seeing organizations as “gendered” structures. Acker (1990) advocates this position when observing that “advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine” (p. 146). In terms of understanding everyday actions within organizations, feminism draws our attention to the “institutional character of women’s economic, political, and ideological subordination” (Mumby, 2001, p. 609).

In Chapter 4, we discussed Mary Parker Follett’s distinction between power *over* others and power *with* others in organizational relationships and her use of “power with” as the basis for her concept of participation. Feminists have an interest similar to Follett’s in distinguishing between power as a means of domination and power as “the ability to accomplish goals” (Iannello, 1992, p. 43). Specifically, feminists advocate the substitution of **empowerment** for power. As Kathleen Iannello explains:

Power is associated with the notion of controlling others, while empowerment is associated with the notion of controlling oneself. Therefore, within organizations based on empowerment, members monitor themselves. In organizations based on power, there must be an administrative oversight function. (pp. 44–45)

When describing the differences in how men and women access power, the notion of power over others is associated more with men, and the notion of empowerment is linked more to women. Both neo-Marxist theory and poststructuralists examine the relationships that exist among capitalism, patriarchy, organization, and gendered communication practices as a way of understanding notions of power over others and empowerment. When social actors seek to exhibit power over others, power becomes a force of domination.

Alternatively, empowerment may be viewed as a force or resistance. For example, feminist neo-Marxist research considers opportunities for collective resistance and change and “examines the ways in which community and egalitarianism can emerge within hierarchical and patriarchal structures” (Mumby, 2001, p. 611).

In the feminist critique of modern organizations, the exercise of power as a means of domination over others is realized through hierarchy, and hierarchy is a fundamental instrument of patriarchal order. According to Kathy Ferguson (1984), “Social relations between classes, races, and sexes are fundamentally unequal. Bureaucracy [hierarchy] . . . serves as a filter for these other forms of domination, projecting them into an institutional arena that both rationalizes and maintains them” (p. 8).

Eliminating domination requires replacement of hierarchy with a collectivist, cooperative structure. In a **collectivist** as opposed to hierarchical organization, decisions and actions would be developed through participative dialogue to achieve action through consensus rather than action through top-down communication of orders from a central authority. Thus, feminist theorists such as Iannello (1992) speak of “decisions without hierarchy” (p. xi). The reformation of organizations into collectivist systems is a goal that appears to be common to most versions of feminist theory, but the attainment of this goal does pose a dilemma. As Hester Eisenstein (1991) expresses the problem:

A fundamental issue [is] unresolved for feminists, and that is how we get from the values we hold dear—of collective, non-hierarchical, democratic behavior—to the outcome we seek, of a peaceful world safe for women and others now subject to discrimination, victimization, and oppression, without sacrificing these values in the rush to seize and use power on behalf of feminist ends. (p. 3)

Achieving organizational reformation seems to depend implicitly in many feminist writings on the hope that women somehow will do a better job than men have done with the use of power. The potential difficulty in fulfilling this hope is reflected in Albrecht and Hall’s (1991) study of innovation networks that we discussed in Chapter 3. They found that core groups of elite insiders dominated the networks. Although two-thirds of the outsiders—the disenfranchised—in Albrecht and Hall’s study were women, women were also 75% of the elites—groups that manipulated the system to reinforce “their own relational positions of privilege, power, and influence” (p. 557). If the quality of organizational life is to be made better for everyone, women and men alike must find an answer to the dilemma Eisenstein poses.

Marshall (1989) discusses an alternative to hierarchy that addresses Eisenstein’s concerns. Specifically, she argues that organizations can structure themselves in *heterarchies* (also discussed in Chapter 3) rather than hierarchies. As she explains, “A heterarchy has no one person or principle in command. Rather temporary pyramids of authority form as and when appropriate in a system of mutual constraints and influences.” (Marshall, 1989, p. 289) An example of a heterarchy was observed by Wyatt (1988) in an ethnographic account of a weaver’s guild. In this guild, there was a system of shared leadership and all opinions expressed by members were respected. Two forms of leadership were present within the guild. First, there was a leader who focused on the overall operation of the guild. Second, task leaders were associated with specific weaving projects. This resulted in a pyramid of authority among the eight women of the guild. They shared leadership of the entire group and rotated responsibility for tasks while sustaining flexibility in goals and values. In an

evaluation of Wyatt's study, Mumby and Putnam (1992) observed, "Nestled in an environment of caring, members balance the demands of differing values, goals and relationships to make the group a place where all members feel comfortable and achieve their individual aims" (p. 475). In such an organizational environment, the opportunities for worker empowerment are clear and meaningful.

Although feminism places emphasis on empowerment, this does not mean that differences among organization members are suppressed under a single structure that empowers everyone in the same way. Consider the experiences of author Michael Papa in participating in community suppers orchestrated by the Good Works organization. When we first discussed the Friday Night Suppers in Chapter 2, we drew attention to the fact that participants in the suppers experienced a dialogic struggle between unity and fragmentation. Specifically, despite many cooperative activities and the building of fellowship among participants, there were people who felt disconnected and fragmented from those around them. Consider the words of Keith Wasserman, Managing Director of Good Works. His commentary provides some insights about transcending dialogic struggle between fragmentation and unity:

Helping homeless people who have been hurt and abused is impossible outside the context of community. It is in the formation of community that we can bear one another's burdens, share vital information, and hand off to one another the most difficult people who need our assistance and love . . . It is in community that we help one another to heal the emotional pain experienced by our homeless neighbors. It is in community that we can do the most loving things toward those who need the most help. It is in community that we can model dignity and responsibility. It is in the context of community that we learn to prevent burn out. What we are suggesting ultimately is that we must intentionally join hands and deliberately attach ourselves to others and organize in a way to maximize our energy so we can all move forward together. (Papa, Papa, Kandath, Worrell, & Muthuswamy, 2005, p. 265)

In order to sustain a feminist perspective on empowerment, we must be careful in interpreting Wasserman's ideas concerning community. Wasserman's insights are potentially illuminating concerning feminist empowerment, but only if we describe community as a product of forces that both unify and fragment. When we promote unity only among the poor, or between the poor and other social classes, we risk perpetuating the status quo rather than interrogating it. Status quo attitudes have created the problem of homelessness, and changes in how we form communities may be necessary so that voices of dissent are not suppressed. Ultimately, we may need to transform our cultural conversation about the problem of homelessness through dialogue. Importantly, this dialogue must manage carefully the tension between unity and fragmentation. Dialogue helps us to discover the bonds that unify us. Just as important, however, dialogue can fragment us in ways that highlight differences that may be impossible to overcome. These tensions do not deny the existence of community. Rather, the dialogic tensions make for a vibrant community (Papa et al., 2006).

In forming and sustaining organizations structured by feminist principles, there are important lessons to be learned from the Good Works community suppers. What is empowering for one person is not empowering for another. No single structure, set of practices, or form of communication will be empowering for everyone. Power or empowerment

from a feminist perspective means sustaining multiple and competing structures that may potentially create empowerment opportunities for all members while also recognizing that there will be moments when certain members struggle over what empowerment means to them. Organization members must also be willing to sustain dialogue over how empowerment opportunities may be made available for all members even if that means juggling multiple systems of organizing and communicating. Finally, organization members need to recognize that despite all efforts certain members within the system may not experience empowerment. This frustrating reality is simply a part of organizational life. From a feminist perspective, however, concentrated effort will be expended in sustaining structures and communicating in ways that provide opportunities for empowerment for many different people in the organization.

Poststructural Perspectives

Poststructuralism focuses on the multiple meanings that may be assigned to texts. Before proceeding to describe the implications that this perspective has for power, it is important to note that texts may be written documents, visual or aural images (such as film), or human action or communication. In Barthes's (1968/1977) essay, "The Death of the Author," he argues that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the author. In making this argument, Barthes gives the reader or observer of a text a greater role in the creation of meaning. In a subsequent work, Barthes (1971/1996) contends that although a text may contain meanings that may be traced to the author (closed reading), a text is actually something that remains open. What he means by this is that different readers or observers may assign different readings or interpretation of the text. Barthes (1971/1996) coined the term *intertextuality* to express the idea that meaning is brought to the text by the audience.

Barthes's ideas have clear implications for understanding power in organizations. Specifically, an employee may act in a way to assert power by demanding that his supervisor justify a recent decision. Independent of the intention of the author of that action, the person to whom the act is directed (the supervisor) may assign a different meaning: this employee is just blowing off steam. This interpretation then justifies the supervisor's non-response. Furthermore, to the extent that multiple people observe a given action, there are multiple possible meanings that will be assigned to that action. So, when people communicate in ways to display or enact power relations, the nature of how that communication will be interpreted depends on who observes or experiences it.

Foucault (1966/1973) has also made significant contributions to poststructuralism. For Foucault, the statements that a person produces are not meaningful in and of themselves. Rather, statements create a network of rules that determine what is meaningful. These rules are the preconditions for statements or utterances to have meaning. According to Foucault, all statements are produced within certain societal conditions and exist within a *field of discourse*. When he uses the term field of discourse, Foucault means the total field within which social actors communicate with one another. This encompasses all statements or utterances that are made in a given societal context. This enormous field of statements is called *discursive formations*.

When Foucault attempts to describe the meanings that statements may have, he brackets out issues of truth and meaning. What this means is that he does not look for a deeper meaning that underlies discourse. Rather, he examines the conditions of existence for

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meaning. Meaning is produced against the backdrop of particular societal conditions during a given time period. More specifically, meaning production takes place within various discursive formations that influence how we view a given text or human action.

If Foucault were to assign a single meaning to discourse, it would position him as a structuralist. What makes Foucault a poststructuralist is the fact that he focuses on differences in meaning that are assigned to particular texts or actions. He is also interested in documenting the different meanings that may develop over time as people consider and reconsider varied interpretations. Finally, he recognizes that a given discursive formation continually generates new statements that may produce new discursive formations. When such changes occur, different meanings are assigned to texts.

Foucault extends Barthes's thinking about power by providing us with a richer understanding of how context influences the meanings that people assign to texts or actions. In an organization, the total communication environment created by people interacting with one another forms discursive formations that influence the meaning that is given to human actions in which power is displayed. Of course different interpretations may be possible in a large organization where people's discursive formations may be influenced by a dominant or exclusive communication network. In other words, more than one discursive formation may be present in a single organization. Furthermore, continued interaction among organization members may produce new discursive formations that produce new interpretations of a given action.

Let's return to the example of the employee who demands that a supervisor justify a recent decision. One context for understanding this action is that it is a legitimate request for accountability from an organization member concerned with the operations of a department. Another context is that this employee wants to discredit the supervisor because of a prior grievance he has with her. Alternatively, the employee makes the demand to draw attention away from his own misbehavior. Or, this employee acts to advocate the interests of another departmental member whose favor he seeks. All of these contexts may operate simultaneously, or individual organization members may accept one as reflective of their understanding of the action. Foucault would also argue that continued interaction among organization members might alter the interpretation they give to the action. These changes occur as organization members redefine their understanding of power dynamics in the department.

Derrida (1967/1976) also advocates opening texts to a broad range of meanings and interpretations. His approach is to take binary oppositions within a text and show how they are not so clear-cut as seems at first glance. For example, let's consider the binary opposition of good and evil. From Derrida's perspective, a reader or observer may view a particular text and recognize that the opposing concepts (good and evil) are in fact fluid. The implication of this recognition is that the text's meaning then becomes fluid. The process of showing this fluidity in texts is *deconstruction*. The process of deconstruction involves "a double movement of overturning these binary oppositions (thus destabilizing the dominant term) and engaging in a process of 'metaphorization,' by which the opposing terms are shown to implicate and define one another in an endless display of signifiers" (Mumby, 2001, p. 607; see also Cooper, 1989, p. 483). When we apply this perspective to the opposing concepts of good and evil, we need to recognize not only that understanding "good" requires an understanding of evil, but that good is in fact defined by evil.

Returning once more to our example of the employee demand for supervisor accountability, Derrida might observe that the action is both good (legitimate request for decision justification) and evil (purposefully manipulative). From one perspective, the request is legitimate (good) because the interests of the department are served by the demand. Supervisors should be held accountable for decisions that significantly affect a department. This action, however, serves the simultaneous purpose of discrediting the supervisor to meet the subordinate's desire to administer punishment (evil), whether or not it is deserved. Alternatively, the act of manipulation on the part of the employee (evil) may serve to draw attention to dysfunctional power dynamics in the department (good) involving the employee who demands accountability and others with whom he is allied. So, choosing whether the act of the employee is good or evil is not as important as understanding that good and evil define each other in the series of actions and interpretations that evolve from the act.

Derrida's significant contribution to poststructuralism is explaining how the meaning of texts or human actions may be shown through deconstruction. As an example, Mumby and Putnam (1992) offered a deconstruction of the concept of "bounded rationality." The term "bounded rationality" was developed by Simon (1976) to acknowledge that there are limitations associated with decision-making rationality in organizations. Specifically, organization members rarely make optimal choices with full recognition of all the relevant facts or information. Rather, "rules of thumb" and minimal information processing characterizes most decisions. In their deconstruction of the term, Mumby and Putnam (1992) juxtapose it with the notion of "bounded emotionality." This poststructural feminist deconstruction does not privilege the feminist (emotionality) over the patriarchal (rationality). Rather, Mumby and Putnam play one term against the other by considering the "rationality of emotions" and the "emotionality of the rational." In offering this deconstruction, they offer us alternative ways of viewing organizing processes. With respect to power relations in organizations, this means that power does not reside in either rationality or emotionality but in both.

POWER AND CONFLICT: CONNECTED AND SEPARATE PHENOMENA

Power and conflict are often connected in the traditional management and conflict literature. Pfeffer's (1981) work is representative of this literature. According to Pfeffer, "power follows from situations in which there is conflict" (p. 96). Why are power and conflict so closely intertwined? Well, when organization members are interdependent, and those members have competing goals in an environment in which rewards and resources are scarce, each member views the other as an obstacle to goal attainment. Hocker and Wilmot (1995), two conflict researchers, make this very point in their definition of interpersonal conflict: "Conflict is an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards and interference from others in achieving their goals" (p. 21). So, when one person views another as an obstacle to goal attainment or the procurement of rewards, he or she will exercise power to try to get his or her way.

Are power and conflict always related? Well, it is difficult to envision a struggle between organization members over scarce rewards or competing goals in which power would not be present. As people present their interpretation of a dispute and express their personal

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needs, they are clearly acting in an empowering manner. Empowerment, however, can exist without conflict. For example, Eisenberg (1994) discusses a form of employee empowerment that is linked to the promotion of *dialogue*. In establishing dialogue, all organization members must have equal opportunities to present their ideas and opinions on important issues. Second, members must display empathy for differing ideas, opinions, and world-views. Finally, the personal feelings and experiences of organization members must be considered legitimate in making decisions. According to Eisenberg (1994), dialogue both “limits defensiveness by reducing attacking communication and, more important, gives people insight into the ways in which others frame their opinions and behavior—the personal and cultural context that can help others seem different, yet sensible” (p. 282). It is certainly reasonable to assume that dialogue (as a form of empowerment) can exist in certain instances without the emergence of conflict.

Given the preceding observations, we feel comfortable with the following two conclusions about the relationship between power and conflict. When a conflict exists in which employees are struggling over scarce rewards and competing goals, there will be displays of power as each side tries to maximize their outcomes. However, there are forms of empowerment (such as dialogue) in which the expression of different viewpoints on an issue will not necessarily promote conflict. The reason for this is that when dialogue is promoted, the different parties to the discussion do not view one another as obstacles to goal attainment; rather, organization members exchange different perspectives on an issue until a potential decision emerges that meets the needs of *all* members. As the discussion evolves, members recognize that their commitment to and respect for one another will prevent a destructive conflict from surfacing in which one side tries to defeat the other. So, a conversation can be sustained in which members help one another to reach goals that are mutually defined and important to all involved. Now that we have explained how power and conflict can be viewed as connected and separate phenomena, we will turn to a more developed description of conflict in organizations in the next chapter.

SUMMARY

The function of communication in constituting organizations depends on the manner in which it is used to exercise power, one of the most pervasive phenomena in organizational life. In hierarchically structured organizations, differences in members' status and power are a simple fact of life. Status refers essentially to the rank or importance of one's position in a group. Traditionally, power has been regarded as any means or resource that one person may employ to gain compliance and cooperation from others.

French and Raven (1959) provided an analysis of social power that has become a classic model for classifying the forms of power applied in organizational relationships. They described five basic types of power: reward, coercive, referent, expert, and legitimate.

Traditional theories of power have tried to describe the forms of power that occur in social processes and have emphasized social exchange explanations for the operation of power. The result is an appealing, but somewhat sterile, account of power that fails to account for the connection between power and communication and somehow seems to ignore the dark side of organizational subservience.

The work of Max Weber inspired the community power debate during the 1950s through the 1970s. This debate moved thinking beyond individual and relationally focused conceptions of power by examining the different dimensions in which power relations were displayed. In his three-dimensional view of power, Lukes (1974) observed that power may be displayed in situations other than decision making or conflict because power resides in the socially constructed and culturally patterned behavior of organization members.

Interpretive perspectives on power emphasize that communication is constitutive of organizing because organization members collectively construct a shared reality through communication. Interpretivists focus on the relationships that exist among communication, power, and meaning. In doing so, interpretivists give us insight into how communication among organization members creates meaning systems that create and sustain relations of power.

In view of modern critical theory, power is inextricably tied to domination and oppression—conditions in the structure of society and in organizations that scholars should reveal and criticize. Critical theory also attempts to show how symbols are used to legitimate dominant forms of organizational reality, thereby restricting the interpretations and meanings that members can attach to organizational actions. In the process, critical theory relies heavily on showing how ideological manipulation and systematically distorted communication sustain hegemony.

Feminist theory has contributed to the critique of power and domination by arguing for “empowerment” as a substitute for traditional concepts of power. Feminist theory calls for reforming organizations from hierarchical systems to collectivities or heterarchies that achieve action through consensus.

Poststructuralists focus on the multiple meanings that may be assigned to texts. One poststructuralist view is that human action needs to be interpreted from the standpoint of the multiple people who observe that action. This perspective also draws our attention to how context influences the meanings people assign to actions.

Finally, we looked at power and conflict as connected and separate phenomena. Power and conflict are connected when workers view one another as obstacles to goal attainment. The two phenomena can exist separately when workers mutually empower one another through dialogue. When dialogue is promoted, workers recognize how goals can be obtained through cooperation rather than by defeating their opposition. We will return to the issues of power and conflict at the beginning of the next chapter.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

1. In what ways does the critical perspective of power differ from the traditional treatment of power?
2. Does the fact that our democratic society protects individual rights limit the application of critical theory to organizational communication? Why or why not?
3. What are the challenges of promoting dialogue in the workplace? Can you envision a problem-solving situation in which the promotion of dialogue would prevent a destructive conflict from surfacing? Have you ever had a conversation with another person that you would classify as a dialogue? If so, what happened in this conversation?

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