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Organizing Workplace Relationships

Mark arrived at the office at 8:00 a.m. and immediately went to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee. Janet was also getting a cup of coffee, so the two of them discussed the meeting scheduled for later that afternoon and how they felt about the proposal on the meeting's agenda regarding expense reimbursement procedures. Both agreed that the new process would be really time-consuming and planned to argue against it. Tim walked in the kitchen just as Mark and Janet were finishing their conversation. Mark quickly left the room—he and Tim had had a pretty big argument a few days earlier, and Mark felt uncomfortable around Tim ever since. Mark then went to his office and looked at his calendar for the day. First up was a meeting with two other sales-people, Jenny and Pete, to discuss ideas about how to pitch the company's latest product. He was looking forward to this meeting and hoping they could come up with some creative ideas. After that, Mark would meet with his super-visor for his semiannual performance evaluation. He was hoping for no sur-prises in that meeting. Then lunch with a new client, so he had to make sure he wasn't late. He wanted to make sure that relationship got off on the right foot. That was just the first half of a typically busy day of work for Mark.

Consider Mark's morning and the typical daily activities in a typical orga-nization, including directing, collaborating, information gathering, informa-tion sharing, rewarding, punishing, conflict, resolution of conflict, controlling, feedback, persuasion, presenting, interviewing, reporting, gossiping, debating, supporting, selling, buying, ordering, managing, leading, and following. All of these activities occur in the context of interpersonal relationships. In fact, vir-tually all organizational activities occur in the context of relationships, even in "virtual" organizations among "virtual" coworkers who operate in different

physical locales. Relationships are the essence of living systems and the basis of organization (Wheatley, 1994, 2001). It is through relationships that systems maintain balance (Katz & Kahn, 1978), chaos becomes order, and fragmentation is made whole (Wheatley, 2001). Accordingly, as Wheatley (2001) noted, scholars should focus attention on "how a workplace organizes its relationships; not its tasks, functions, and hierarchies, but the patterns of relationships and the capacities available to form them" (p. 39).

Relationships in the workplace are particularly important and consequential interpersonal relationships. An individual with a full-time job, for example, is likely to spend as much, if not more, of his or her time interacting with coworkers than with friends and family. Even when we're not at work, we spend much of our time talking and thinking about work. We are largely defined by what we do for a living and with whom we work. Not surprisingly then, in many ways, our workplace relationships define who we are (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

In contrast to "acquaintances" or people who have limited contact with one another, an interpersonal *relationship* is characterized by repeated, patterned interaction over time (Sias, Krone, & Jablin, 2002). Unlike acquaintanceships, relationships are enduring, although some endure longer than others. Interpersonal relationships are also characterized by a feeling of connection beyond that experienced in an acquaintanceship. Again, relationships vary in the extent of this connection, but generally speaking, the closer the relationship, the stronger and more emotional the connection.

The term *workplace relationship* generally refers to all interpersonal relationships in which individuals engage as they perform their jobs, including supervisor–subordinate relationships, peer coworker relationships, workplace friendships, romantic relationships, and customer relationships. These relationships have been studied by a variety of scholars in a variety of disciplines. As a result, we know a great deal about workplace relationships and their role in organizational processes and individuals' lives.

Our study of workplace relationships has been limited, however. As the following chapters will demonstrate, the bulk of research on workplace relationships has been guided by a postpositivist perspective that conceptualizes workplace relationships in a specific way and centers on identifying relationships among variables with the goal of predicting effectiveness in specific contexts. Certainly this work is of great value, providing an enormous amount of knowledge about workplace relationships and their roles in organizational processes.

Relying on a single theoretical lens and conceptualization of a subject narrows our vision, however, much like using only a zoom lens on a camera limits our view of a photographic subject by focusing on one aspect of that subject. Broadcasters at sporting events typically place cameras at several spots around the field of play, some shooting close-up shots, others from a distance, all filming the action from a variety of angles and perspectives. I was struck by this recently when watching a soccer game on television. Due to technical difficulties,

only one of the dozen or so cameras was operational during a 5-minute portion of the game. During that time, the single camera simply followed the ball from one side of the field, up and down the field as the game continued. Consistent with the old saying "You don't know what you've got til it's gone," I was struck by the fact that many of the most interesting elements of the game were out of view—defensive positioning, reactions of various defensive and offensive players, their coaches and, of course, the spectators. Although I could watch what would be considered the main part of the game (i.e., where the ball went), ignoring the other elements made for a limited and much less interesting viewing experience. The contrast was striking when the other cameras came back in use. Filming the subject from a variety of angles and perspectives provided a much more complex, full, and informative view. Seeing the field from many different angles, watching the players who were not controlling the ball, seeing the expressions of the coaches and the spectators shed insights into various aspects of the event and, as a result, made for a more rich, interesting, and rewarding experience. This experience highlighted for me the value of multiple perspectives.

The usefulness of multiple *theoretical* perspectives and "metatheory" has been widely debated in recent years. The debate centers largely on the extent to which a scholar should "choose" or commit to a particular theoretical perspective, or develop an understanding of multiple theoretical perspectives and conduct research on a particular phenomenon, such as workplace relationships, from varying perspectives. In the field of communication, Sheperd, St. John, and Striphas (2006), for example, claim an "unapologetically stubborn suspicion that communication theorists have become a bit too open minded with regard to perspectives on communication" (p. xi). While recognizing various theoretical perspectives, these authors argue that scholars generally experience resonance and commit to a particular theoretical perspective, and rightly so. Craig (1999), on the other hand, highlights the practicality and usefulness of understanding and accepting multiple theoretical perspectives and the insights each perspective can provide on a single phenomenon, such as workplace relationships. While a scholar is not required, nor even strongly encouraged to study a particular phenomenon from multiple perspectives, understanding the assumptions and value of varying perspectives can lead to a group of scholars studying that phenomenon from multiple perspectives and together developing a rich, deep, and complex body of knowledge about that phenomenon.

This orientation toward complementary holism (Albert et al., 1986) acknowledges multiple and interconnected frameworks that together provide a rich and complex context for understanding social reality. It is this orientation that guides this book and my treatment of workplace relationships. While my own research is grounded primarily in postpositivist and social construction theory, I appreciate the insights provided by colleagues who address workplace relationships from other theoretical perspectives. My appreciation is enabled, however, by my ability to understand their work and recognize the fundamentally

unique conceptualizations of organizations, communication, and relationships that ground their research. Moreover, I don't just appreciate work grounded in other perspectives; I actively seek it out as I try to develop rich and more nuanced understandings of workplace relationships. This book is an attempt to encourage other scholars from various disciplines and perspectives to enter into a community of scholars studying workplace relationships from multiple theoretical perspectives.

As mentioned in the preface, one goal of this book is to provide a comprehensive discussion of existing workplace relationship research. Another goal, and the primary purpose of this chapter, is to show how considering workplace relationships from multiple perspectives, each valuable in its own right, can greatly enrich our understanding of workplace relationships and their role in organizational processes. Each perspective provides unique conceptualizations of organizations, communication, and relationships. These conceptualizations drive different research foci, each of which provides important insights. Each perspective draws practitioners' attention to different elements of an organizational phenomenon or situation. Thus, broadening our theoretical lenses can provide a more thorough and complex understanding of workplace relationship issues and dynamics, and this broadened understanding can enrich both research and practice.

Communication scholars have organized theoretical perspectives and traditions using a variety of organizing systems. Craig (1999, 2007) focuses on seven primary theoretical traditions that subsume virtually all areas of communication. More specific to organizational communication, Deetz (2001) categorized research into four primary perspectives or approaches: postpositivist, interpretive, critical, and postmodern. May and Mumby (2005) broadened Deetz's system by adding rhetorical, social construction, globalization, and structuration theory. I rely on a synthesis of Deetz (2001) and May and Mumby (2005) for this book, organizing each chapter around postpositivist, social construction, critical, and structuration theories. I chose these theoretical perspectives for a variety of reasons. Space limitations preclude me from discussing all possible theoretical perspectives. I, therefore, chose what I believe are the most widely used and most influential for the organizational communication discipline and potentially most useful for studying workplace relationships.

More specifically, *postpositivism* is largely recognized as the "dominant theoretical frame for studying organizations" (Mumby & May, 2005, p. 4). As seen in the remaining chapters of this book, the postpositivist perspective guides the bulk of workplace relationship research. I include *social constructionism* because it was the foundational theoretical perspective for the "interpretive turn" taken in organizational research (Mumby & May, 2005). The interpretive turn represented a watershed moment for organizational scholars (Deetz, 2001) in that the move from studying "communication in organizations" to studying "communication as constituting organizations" radically

changed how we study communication and organizations (Allen, 2005). Social constructionism also grounds the other two theoretical perspectives covered in this book—critical theory and structuration theory.

Scholars began using *critical theory* in organizational research primarily in the 1980s as a rejection of the field's "managerial bias." Instead, individuals are given primacy and issues of power, politics, control, and marginalization received attention. This was another important paradigmatic shift for the field that warrants inclusion in this volume. Although scholars disagree on whether feminist theory is a distinct theoretical perspective or a subset of critical theory (Ashcraft, 2005), I include it with critical theory because of its roots in that tradition. Finally, *structuration theory* (which in many ways is rooted in postpositivism, social constructionism, and critical theory) is included because of the theory's enormous influence on organizational research over the past three decades, and because it combines aspects of the other three perspectives in novel and important ways.

In the following sections, I discuss the primary assumptions of each perspective, how each perspective conceptualizes organizations, communication, and workplace relationships, and the research agendas that are guided by those conceptualizations. Table 1.1 summarizes this discussion.

Postpositivist Approaches to Workplace Relationships

Postpositivism is rooted in the scientific method. It derives from positivism and developed in response to a variety of criticisms leveled against positivism during the 20th century. Similar to positivism, postpositivism is primarily concerned with the search for causal relationships that enable us to predict and control our environments (K. I. Miller, 2000). Postpositivism departs from positivism in a variety of ways, however. Corman (2005) recently provided an excellent summary of these debates and of postpositivism, and delineated several basic principles of postpositivism that guide theory and research in organizational communication.

According to the postpositivist perspective, the social sciences and the natural sciences, although not isomorphic, are united. That is, social beings occupy and operate in physical space (Corman, 2005). Human beings are physical objects and can be physically observed, much like other aspects of nature such as flora and fauna. This *naturalism* principle has important implications for research. First, because humans are physical objects, human behavior is observable and, therefore, can be measured and evaluated. Thus, postpositivist research focuses attention on human behavior. Second, as physical objects, individuals' behaviors affect, and are affected by, the physical world. Consequently, postpositivists are drawn to studies that identify causal linkages between the social and natural world, such as how physical proximity impacts human

Table 1.1   Theoretical Perspectives on Workplace Relationships

	Postpositivism	*Social Construction*	*Critical Theory*	*Structuration Theory*
Conceptualization of organizations	Real entities that exist beyond human perception "Contain" individuals Indicated by attitudes, behavior	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic Systems of power, domination, and control	Socially constructed Constituted in social practices Dynamic Patterned social practices of organizational members across social systems
Conceptualization of communication	Occurs "inside" the relationship Indicates nature and status of the relationship	Constitutes social reality Constitutes relationships; as communication changes, so does the relationship	Constitutes social reality Constitutes relationships Essentializes and reifies organizational "realities" and relationships	Constitutes society and social systems Enables, produces, and reproduces structure Enabled and constrained by structure
Conceptualization of relationships	Real entities that exist beyond human perception "Contain" individuals Indicated by attitudes, communication behavior Predictive of outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, productivity, commitment) Influenced by physical environment	Socially constructed Exist in interaction Observable in interaction	Socially constructed Sites of power, domination, marginalization Sites of hegemonic, unobtrusive control	Socially constructed Constrained and enabled by structure

	Postpositivism	Social Construction	Critical Theory	Structuration Theory
Research goals	Measuring indicators of relationship quality and status Predicting outcomes of relationships	Understanding social construction process Understanding relationship development dynamics	Understanding social construction of power, marginalization, reification, consent, domination, universalism of managerial interests and rationality	Understanding production, reproduction, and institutionalization of relationships
Sample research topics/questions	Association between relationship quality and outcomes (e.g., supervisor–subordinate relationships and employee productivity, turnover, and satisfaction; coworker relationship quality and information amount and quality) Association between communication behavior (e.g., frequency, content) and relationship quality	How do individuals construct workplace relationships? How do employees communicatively transform workplace relationships? How do individuals construct organizational realities through interaction with supervisors and coworkers (e.g., how are decision premises constructed in conversations between workplace friends?)	How do employees enact and abuse power in workplace relationships? How is participation in relationships and relationship networks associated with access to information, power, and dominance? How do individuals become marginalized from relationships and relationship networks?	What structures constrain and enable workplace relationships? How are workplace relationship structures institutionalized in U.S. culture? What workplace relationship structures transcend time and space? How do individuals develop structures for developing and negotiating various types of workplace relationships?

(Continued)

Table 1.1 (Continued)

	Postpositivism	Social Construction	Critical Theory	Structuration Theory
Sample research topics/questions (continued)	Association between workplace relationships and context (e.g., physical proximity, technology, tasks, etc.) Association between individual characteristics (e.g., gender, age, dispositions) and relationship quality		How do workplace relationships and relationship networks reinforce (or destabilize) organizational dominance and control? How are specific relational dynamics (e.g., hierarchy in the supervisor–subordinate relationship) reified? How does macrolevel (societal) discourse engender employee consent to relationship power dynamics?	How are workplace friendships constrained by the organization's governing ideology?

relationship development (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Third, conceptualizing human beings as physical objects who occupy space *in* the natural world leads to the conceptualization of organizations as "containers" in which individuals carry out their work (R. C. Smith & Turner, 1995). Thus, while the naturalist principle unites the social and physical world, it also bifurcates the two by placing people (the social world) *inside* physical locations such as organizations (the physical world).

Postpositivism takes a *realist* stance, assuming a social reality exists, although we as human beings cannot actually see it. This principle stands in contrast to the positivism's antirealist stance that perceptions are what matter. Moreover, despite the fact that reality exists outside our perceptions, we can, and should, study that reality. *Transcendental reasoning* allows us to believe in the reality of things we cannot directly observe based on observing conditions that indicate the existence of something else (Corman, 2005). For example, although we cannot actually see or directly perceive organizations, we believe they exist because they are indicated in other observable phenomena, specifically observable coordinated human behavior.

Together, the postpositivist principles of naturalism and realism imply that reality exists, but is not directly observable. However, human beings, as occupiers of the natural, real world, *are* observable. To understand "reality," we must examine indicators of that reality. Thus, to understand the reality of an organization, we must examine indicators of that reality by observing human behavior. So, for example, we cannot see and directly study an organization's culture; however, the culture is indicated by employee behaviors and attitudes, which we can observe and assess. Communication is conceptualized, then, as an indication of a reality that otherwise transcends our perceptions. Communication is an observable, measurable act that indicates reality. Accordingly, postpositivist studies of organizational communication typically assess communication to understand and predict something else (e.g., organizational culture).

A postpositivist approach to workplace relationships functions similarly. From this perspective, the workplace relationship is an entity that exists in a reality that transcends our perceptions, but is indicated by observable indicators. Such indicators include individual self-report assessments (e.g., a measure of supervisor–subordinate relationship quality). They also include assessments of communication, such as self-reports of the frequency with which individuals communicate with one another, topics about which they communicate, their satisfaction with their communication with a coworker, and the like. Postpositivist research also can include observations of actual communication that indicate relationship status.

In sum, postpositivist studies of workplace relationships conceptualize relationships as "real" entities that transcend our perception. These entities "contain" the relationship partners who behave in specific and patterned ways in those relationships.

Workplace relationship research guided by postpositivism addresses a number of interesting and important issues. Postpositivist research assesses the nature of workplace relationships by examining observable indicators of the relationship such as communication and attitudinal measures. Accordingly, postpositivist research on workplace relationships examines issues such as how certain communication practices indicate and predict relationship quality, and how relationship quality or quantity predicts observable organizational outcomes such as employee satisfaction, productivity, career advancement, and the like. Postpositivist research also examines links between workplace relationships and the context in which they exist. For example, scholars have studied the impact of workplace characteristics such as proximity, climate, and workload on friendship development (Sias & Cahill, 1998). In addition, following the naturalism principle, scholars have examined the ways employees' physical attributes, such as biological sex, are associated with their relationships with others in the workplace (e.g., Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, 2003).

Social Construction Approaches to Workplace Relationships

Rather than conceptualizing reality as existing outside our perceptions, social construction theory conceptualizes reality as socially constructed. P. L. Berger and Luckmann (1966) laid the foundation of social constructionism in their seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge.* Their argument rests on a few fundamental assumptions. First, human behavior is grounded in knowledge; that is, our behavior is informed by our knowledge and understanding of the world around us. Second, knowledge results from social processes (Allen, 2005). Thus, rather than being objective and real, knowledge is socially constructed and socially contested. Third, social constructionism rejects the notion of an objective reality and instead maintains that reality is socially constructed. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) stated, "The sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality" (p. 19). In contrast to postpositivism, human beings do not behave in and react to reality; they construct it via social practices.

Social constructionism has a number of important implications for organizational researchers. First, human behavior does not simply indicate reality; it creates reality. Thus, reality is not objective, it is subjective—subject to the moment-by-moment social behavior that constitutes it. Second, reality is not static, it is dynamic—reality changes as social behavior changes. Third, the primary goal of social construction theory is to understand how humans create knowledge and social reality. Accordingly, social construction research focuses primarily on process, rather than product.

Consistent with this, organizational research guided by the social construction perspective conceptualizes organizations as socially constructed realities that are constituted in member interaction. An organization does not exist in a physical location; it exists in the interaction of its members. When discussing social construction theory in class, I ask my students, "Where is Washington State University?" They invariably answer with the university's physical location—Pullman, Washington. I explain that, according to social constructionists, Washington State University isn't "in" Pullman, Washington. It exists, instead, in the interaction of its members. Certainly, much of this interaction happens to occur in Pullman, but the organization itself exists in member interaction and, therefore, WSU is wherever members are interacting to do the work of the organization. This dynamic view of organizations is distinct from the postpositivist approach in important ways. Rather than examining communication as an indicator of the *organization,* social construction research examines the process of *organizing:* the role of communicating in creating, maintaining, and transforming organizations. The organization does not transcend our perception. It is directly observable in the organizing (i.e., communication) process.

Researchers studying workplace relationships from a social construction perspective conceptualize such entities as constituted in interaction. Thus, relationships do not exist outside the interaction of the relationship partners. More specifically, relationships do not exist outside the patterned interaction of the partners. Much research in the area of interpersonal relationships is grounded in social construction theory (e.g., Duck & Pittman, 1997). Relatively few studies of *workplace* relationships, however, take such an approach.

Studying workplace relationships from a social construction perspective requires the basic assumptions outlined above. First, the relationship does not exist in a reality that transcends our perceptions. Rather, it is constituted in the interaction of its members. Second, relationships are not containers for human behavior; they are constituted in human behavior. Given these assumptions, social construction studies of workplace relationships focus on examining communication behavior between relationship partners. Studying supervisor–subordinate relationships, for example, requires analyzing supervisor–subordinate interaction. Such examination does not simply provide an indication of the nature of that relationship; it demonstrates the actual construction, maintenance, and/or transformation of that relationship.

Research on workplace relationships grounded in the social construction perspective addresses issues associated with relationship dynamics and processes. This includes studies of how members construct functional or dysfunctional relationships with their supervisors and coworkers (e.g., Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989) and how employees transform their relationships with others (e.g., Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, & Fix, 2004). Social constructionist research could also examine how individuals construct "organizational realities" through interaction with supervisors and other coworkers. For example, a social construction

study might ascertain the ways in which coworker conversation among friends impacts employee decision making.

Social constructionism has become a central perspective in organizational research, both in driving innovative research agendas and also by virtue of the fact that social constructionism provides the foundation for other innovative and important theoretical perspectives, including critical theory and structuration theory, which are discussed below.

Critical Approaches to Workplace Relationships

Power and politics have always been important issues of study by organizational communication, management, and sociology scholars. Early formal theories of organization, such as bureaucratic theory (Weber, 1947) and administrative management theory (Fayol, 1949), held hierarchy and control at the core of organizational processes, emphasizing chain of command, order, control, and discipline. Until the mid-1980s, studies of organizational power and politics had a distinctly managerial bias in which the goal of such research was to enable management to more effectively (read "productively") control employees (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983).

Critical theory and critical approaches to organizing took a very different, and important, turn. Critical theories assume a radical stance on society and organization, emphasizing the individual over the organization. Critical scholars are concerned not with managerial effectiveness, but with the institutional oppression and exploitation of individuals. Issues of injustice, asymmetrical power relations, marginalization, and abuse are the concerns of critical research (Deetz, 1992; Mumby, 1988). Moreover, critical theorists situate organizational power and politics in larger political and economic systems and problematic societal discursive formations that reproduce and reify inequitable power relations. A thorough discussion of critical theory is beyond the scope of this chapter, and readers are directed to recent treatments by Deetz (2001) and Mumby (2000, 2001) for additional reading. For purposes of this chapter, I discuss a few primary assumptions and concerns of critical theory as they relate to organizations and workplace relationships.

Like the social construction perspective, critical theory conceptualizes language and communication as core to any understanding of organizational processes. Organizations are not tangible entities that exist outside our perception. Organizations are socially constructed dynamic entities constituted in the interaction of the organization members. Critical theory, however, goes beyond social constructionism in conceptualizing organizations as not just socially constructed, but as socially constructed systems of power, control, and domination. Thus, as members construct the organization, they construct a system of domination that empowers some while marginalizing others. A primary

goal of critical research, therefore, is to identify and reveal the various methods of power, control, and domination, particularly the hidden or unobtrusive forms to which individuals are most vulnerable.

At a broad level, critical scholars study organizational power by focusing on "the relationships among communication, power and meaning" (Mumby, 2001, p. 595). More specifically, in his recent discussion of critical theory and organizational research, Deetz (2005) outlined four recurrent themes in critical research that address this broad issue. First, critical work shows a concern with *reification,* which refers to ways in which social, and socially constructed, phenomena become naturalized and unquestioned. In such research, critical scholars examine the reification and resulting hegemonic power of bureaucratic principles such as hierarchy, authority, and rationality (Putnam & Mumby, 1993). This reification process makes such principles appear natural, indispensable, and, therefore, unquestionable and immutable. An illustration of the power of reification and hegemony is provided by considering an organization without any hierarchy. While such organizations do exist (e.g., collectives), they are very rare and often considered to be "alternative" or, put less charitably, "weird."

Second, critical scholars are concerned with "*the suppression of conflicting interests and universalization of managerial interests*" (Deetz, 2005, p. 95). Critical research problematizes the largely unquestioned primacy of managerial/ organizational performance goals over the interests of individuals, noting that powerful organizational members, as well as organizational researchers, often assume a singular universal organizational interest, assuming that the interests of the organization and management are the interests of the employees. One of critical theory's central tenets is the questioning of organizational practices with respect to whose interests are served by such practices. Thus, for example, when executives of a large banking institution decided to increase business, and therefore profits, by opening branches on Saturdays, they did not consider how weekend hours might disrupt the branch employees' personal lives (Pearce, 1995).

A third theme of critical research is the *dominance of technical rationality* as the primary and optimal form of reasoning. Such instrumental reasoning, characterized by efficiency and means-end control, has dominated organizational research and practice, and made alternative forms of reasoning appear irrational (Deetz, 2005, p. 97). As a result, emotion, intuition, understanding, empathic concern, and a variety of "alternative" forms of reasoning are marginalized (Mumby & Putnam, 1992).

A fourth theme found in critical writings has to do with the issue of *consent.* In particular, although bureaucratic and authoritarian forms of management are characterized by direct and explicit forms of control, critical scholars are concerned with hidden, unobtrusive, and arguably more potent forms of control (e.g., concertive control, identification) and the processes by which individuals consent to such control (e.g., Barker, 1993; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). For example, an employee may not think to resist his supervisor's

continual verbal abuse not because of fear of retaliation, but because of deeply rooted assumptions linking formal rank and power; in other words, the employee "consents" to the abuse because to resist formal authority is counter to his ideological assumptions and worldview.

Critical scholars address these issues at two primary levels. At the level of micropractices, scholars examine power and control in the context of social relations among individuals and groups (Mumby, 2000). Theory and research at this level address the discursive construction of meaning, power, and identity in everyday communication. At a broader macrolevel, critical scholars center on revealing the hegemonic processes by which "discourses" of meaning, identity, and knowledge are constructed, reproduced, and maintained and how such discourses function to support and reify dominant power and political structures in society (e.g., Deetz, 1992). Such work, for example, highlights the societal dominance of technical reasoning or technical rationality that frames knowledge and meaning in reference to efficiency, predictability, rationality, and control (Deetz, 2005; Habermas, 1984; Mumby, 2000). Such knowledge constrains our participation as active agents not only in the context of organizations, but also in how we organize everyday life (Deetz, 1992).

Communication is clearly central to critical theory. Similar to social constructionism, critical theory conceptualizes communication as dynamic and constitutive of organizations. Critical theorists emphasize the power and political nature of communication, revealing the ways communication essentializes and reifies organizational structures and processes, making them appear real and natural and, therefore, immutable. Communication is the process by which organizational structures and practices become reified, by which managerial interests are promoted and individual or conflicting interests marginalized, by which alternative forms of reasoning become devalued, and by which unobtrusive and hidden forms of control are wielded by management and consented to by individuals.

Critical approaches to workplace relationships are guided by the above set of assumptions and conceptualizations. From this perspective, workplace relationships are conceptualized as socially constructed entities constituted in human interaction. A relationship does not exist outside the interaction of the relationship partners, and the quality and nature of the relationship is dependent upon the quality and nature of the interaction of the relationship members. Similar to social constructionism then, workplace relationships from a critical perspective are dynamic entities constituted in interaction, and as partner interaction changes or remains stable, so does the relationship. Critical theory, however, conceptualizes relationships not just as socially constructed entities, but as socially constructed sites of power, domination, resistance, and struggle. In relationships, individual members construct their knowledge, identities, and understanding of organizational processes, goals, and values.

The conceptualizations described above inform a unique research agenda. Critical workplace relationship research addresses issues such as how individuals communicatively enact and abuse power and control in various workplace relationships (e.g., with supervisors, peer coworkers, etc.). Moreover, critical research would examine how participation in workplace relationships constructs and maintains organizational power and domination systems; how communication and discourse includes and excludes individuals from participation in relationship networks; how workplace relationships provide, or deny, access to "voice" and influence; and the hegemonic processes (e.g., broader societal discursive formations) that engender the consent of employees to such dynamics. In addition, critical studies would examine the processes by which certain workplace relationship dynamics, such as hierarchy in the supervisor–subordinate relationship or discrimination in a cross-sex coworker relationship, become reified and taken as natural.

Structuration Theory and Workplace Relationships

Sociologist Anthony Giddens introduced structuration theory in response to the "orthodox consensus" that dominated sociology in the postwar period rooted in positivism. Giddens (1984) believed the logical empiricism of the natural sciences was inapplicable to social theory, arguing that societal factors acting in the same manner as causal relationships of natural sciences cannot explain human conduct (Baert, 1998). Instead, he argued, people call upon structures for the initiation of their actions, and the production of social life is a skilled performance by agents. Agents are responsible for the production and reproduction of social systems that guide their action. Consequently, Giddens advocated the study of actors as agents of social life. Structuration theory, therefore, has roots in the social construction perspective.

Giddens, however, argued that while positivism gave primacy to structure (e.g., structure determines individual behavior), social constructionists often gave primacy to agency (e.g., human behavior determines structure). Structuration theory reconceptualized this dichotomous relationship between individual and society as a dualism, emphasizing the inseparability of agency and structure united through social practices (Berends, Boersma, & Weggeman, 2003). A thorough discussion of structuration theory is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Berends et al., 2003; Giddens, 1979, 1984; and Poole & McPhee, 2005, for excellent treatments of the theory). I focus instead on the primary concepts of structuration theory as they apply to the study of workplace relationships: structure, systems, social and system integration, and time–space distanciation.

According to structuration theory, a social system exists through the reproduced social practices, or *structures,* of actors or groups of actors

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(Giddens, 1984). These practices (recurring, regular, and structured actions of individuals situated within a social system) create and recreate the system (Giddens, 1984). Thus, structure is both outcome and medium. It is outcome in the sense that structure is produced and reproduced in interaction; it is the medium for interaction in the sense that actors do not construct social reality from nothing, but draw upon preexisting structural elements in their actions. Specifically, structure is comprised of rules and resources. Rules are implicit guidelines for action. Resources are all personal traits, abilities, knowledge, and possessions people bring to interactions. Actors (agents) draw upon structure to take part in system practices. Thus, structures enable human behavior. For example, my understanding of appropriate teaching behaviors and resources such as knowledge of course material, a classroom, and teaching technologies comprise a structure that enables me to deliver an effective lecture. At the same time, human behavior produces and reproduces structure. Thus, each time I lecture, I (re)produce the "teaching" structure. Production happens when people use rules and resources in interaction. Reproduction occurs when actions reinforce features of the systems already in place. This reciprocal process is known as the *duality of structure.*

As people continually reproduce structures in their interaction, they create and maintain systems. *Systems* are patterns of social relations across stretches of time and space, constituted in reproduced agents' practices. Social systems vary widely in their degree of "systemness." Some structures, such as the U.S. public school system, develop into highly institutionalized systems, while others, such as a newly formed political party, are less entrenched, systematic, and, consequently, less powerful.

The concepts of *integration* and *time/space distanciation* explain how structures become systematic and institutionalized. These concepts address the ways microlevel practices, informed by, and reproduced as, structures, are transported and appropriated across time and space, constructing institutionalized systematic structures at the macro or societal level. Essentially, as structures are enacted and reproduced across time and spaces, "orders of institutional relationships are formed, codified, memorialized, and concretized as contextual features in the structuration of social life" (Banks & Riley, 1991, p. 176). As Banks and Riley (1991) explain, time/space distanciation theorizes "the relation between action in the here and now and the reproduction of institutional context, practices, and expectations that stretch out potentially (and increasingly) vast distances and time spans" (p. 175). While *social integration* refers to the reciprocity of practices by co-present actors (e.g., individuals enact and reproduce specific structures in face-to-face interaction with one another), *system integration* refers to the same process as it occurs across time and space and "outside conditions of co-presence" (Giddens, 1984, p. 377). Social systems stretch across time and space (time/space distanciation) via the mechanisms of

social and system integration. As structures are continually reinforced and "regrooved" across time and space (contexts), those structures become integrated at the system level and institutionalized. At that point, these structures become systemic and "taken for granted." Thus, for example, one is likely to find more similarities than differences in how lectures are delivered in undergraduate classes by different teachers at different universities across the United States.

Toward this end, structuration theory posits that agents act at three levels of consciousness. The *discursive* level refers to social practices that we can express and explain at a conscious level (e.g., we are highly conscious of our spoken words when presenting a formal proposal to a new client). As structures are reproduced and become more habitual, we operate at the *practical* level. This level refers to knowledge and skills we cannot put into words but use in action. It represents what we know and believe about social conditions and their own actions, but cannot express discursively (e.g., we know we should not violate informal rules, but find it hard to explain why). Finally, the *unconscious* refers to experiences we cannot easily call into awareness (e.g., although we probably engage in "hello," "how are you," "I'm fine" exchanges several times a day, we cannot easily recall and account for each instance).

Structuration theory has a number of important implications for organizational research. First, as mentioned above, structuration theory rejects the structure–agent dichotomy and, consequently, rejects the notion of an objective reality separate from human action. Instead, the theory is grounded in social constructionism, conceptualizing social systems (e.g., organizations) and, therefore, social reality as constituted in social practices. As social systems, organizations are conceptualized as the patterned social practices of organizational members, or systems. In this manner, structuration theory provides a dynamic conceptualization of organizations. Structuration theory also explains the process by which social systems become institutionalized and "taken for granted." Similar to critical theory, structuration theory problematizes those institutionalized social structures that have become so entrenched across time and space that they appear real, natural, reified, and unquestioned.

Communication plays an important role in structuration theory. Agents' social practices, including communication, constitute social systems. Thus, similar to social constructionism, communication does not reflect or indicate reality; it creates reality. Structuration theory goes beyond social constructionism, however, with the concept of the duality of structure—communication creates structures that *simultaneously* enable and constrain communication. This added component broadens the theoretical, and research, lens.

Structuration theory conceptualizes workplace relationships as communicatively constituted entities. Again, similar to social constructionism, workplace relationships exist in member interaction, and as interaction changes, so

does the relationship. Beyond this, however, structuration theory also concep-
tualizes workplace relationships as enabled and constrained by structures—
structures that guide, yet limit, interaction that is appropriate for that
particular relationship (e.g., employees typically communicate differently with
their peer coworkers than with their supervisors or subordinate employees).

Given these assumptions and conceptualizations, workplace relationship
research grounded in structuration theory would examine a number of inter-
esting and important issues. Researchers could uncover the structures that
enable and constrain various types of workplace relationships (e.g., what struc-
tures govern and distinguish supervisor–subordinate relationships from peer
relationships?), the processes by which such structures transcend time and
space (e.g., how are workplace relationship structures transported across
countries in multinational organizations?), the processes by which workplace
relationship structures become, or have become, institutionalized at the societal
level (e.g., to what extent are workplace relationship dynamics replicated and
reproduced across organizations and industries?), and the ways individuals
(agents) transform, rather than reproduce, workplace relationship structures.

Conclusion

Workplace relationships are vital to both organizational and individual well-
being. Despite their importance, the workplace relationship literature is com-
paratively underdeveloped. The bulk of research has focused on one type of
relationship—the supervisor–subordinate relationship—and has relied largely
on a single theoretical lens—postpositivism. While existing research is of great
value, broadening our views and approaches toward organizations, communi-
cation, and relationships has the potential for greatly enriching both research
and practice. In particular, social constructionism, critical theory, and struc-
turation theory each conceptualize organizations, and organizational relation-
ships, in unique and innovative ways. As the following chapters demonstrate,
studying workplace relationships and approaching the phenomena in practice
from each of these perspectives is essential to the growth and development of
our field and to improved organizational and employee experiences.