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Altered Practice <=> Altered Stories <=> Altered Lives: Three Considerations for Translating Organizational Communication Scholarship into Practice

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ALTERED PRACTICE ↔ ALTERED STORIES ↔ ALTERED LIVES

Three Considerations for Translating Organizational Communication Scholarship Into Practice

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I have a confession to make. I originally entered academia with the desire to (a) escape long hours at work and (b) help organizations change for the better. I still have hopes for realizing one of those goals.

Here I offer three unabashedly normative considerations for translating organizational communication scholarship to practice. They include identifying a problem, incorporating participant voices, and presenting research to practitioners. By engaging in these practices scholars can, I believe, create alternative organizational stories and in doing so create space for organizational action and change. None of the practices is complex or new. Nevertheless, their simplicity belies the consistent and mindful effort required to enact them. These practices largely emanate from my own interpretive investigations of emotion labor in total institutional settings (e.g., Tracy, 2000, 2001; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). However, the core ideas are designed to be applicable to scholars using various methodologies in various contexts.

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IDENTIFY A PROBLEM

Although conceptions of scientific theory, or concern with what is, tend to dominate discussions of communication theory, an increasing number of scholars are calling for more normative theories in communication, or concern with what ought to be (e.g., Craig, 1989, 1999). Craig and Tracy (1995) suggested that theories do more to address "actual problems and requirements of communicative praxis in particular settings" (p. 249). Likewise, the president of the National Communication Association recently encouraged communication scholars to engage in what Stokes (1999) has termed "use-inspired basic research"—that which is devoted to solving problems that improve the lives of real people (Applegate, 2002). Considering this, a good place to start a research project is to focus on a problem in the field.

Of course, focusing on problems in the field is easier said than done, especially as we become more seasoned researchers. In the early parts of our career we have the luxury of standing in that theoretically vacuous (yet exciting) place where we have little understanding of any scholarly literatures, which makes it quite simple, even convenient, to rely upon field problems to determine research emphases. However, as we become more experienced and specialized, the impetus for research direction has a tendency to shift from problems in the field to our files bulging with articles and past conference papers that neatly lay out favorite theoretical phenomena. Given this, as scholars progress through their careers they may need to become increasingly mindful and diligent to challenges important to research participants if they truly desire to examine and make sense of practical organizational issues.

Several research activities encourage a focus on emergent organizational problems. For instance, scouring newspapers and business magazines provides information on the latest organizational dilemmas and the ways practitioners are trying to make sense of them. Scholars can also engage in pilot studies or early exploratory interviews with organizational participants to learn about the problems they face in their day-to-day work. In addition, researchers can engage in systematic minianalyses throughout the data gathering or experimental process and modify research foci accordingly.

Engaging in methods such as these not only assists in the translation of theory to practice but can also revitalize individuals' research programs.

INCORPORATE PARTICIPANTS' VOICES

After identifying a problem in the field, scholars should consider including participants' voices in research analyses and reports. Including respondent voice is a key tenet of interpretive research in general (Denzin, 1997) and participatory action research in particular (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000); the knowledge, experience, and interpretations of participants is directly honored and valued, and the goal is to produce knowledge that is directly useful to a group of people (Reason, 1994). However, we are often more comfortable gathering data than discussing interpretations with participants. Sharing analyses opens the risk of offending participants. Or worse, participants might completely disagree with our carefully crafted interpretations.

Despite these fears, engaging participants in dialogue about research analyses can yield a more nuanced understanding and takes the researcher out of the role of detached expert (Denzin, 1997; Martin, 1992). As Giddens (1979) pointed out, research participants are not "cultural dopes" (p. 71)—rather, "they can give cogent reasons for their intentions and actions, and generally demonstrate a sophisticated (although not necessarily social scientific) understanding of the situations they inhabit" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 573).

Researchers can include participant voice using a variety of methodological activities. During observation, researchers can note particular organizational incidents and later ask participants in interviews to interpret them. Furthermore, researchers can ask participants to explain puzzling or contradictory interview statements or to comment on preliminary data analyses. Martin (1992) even suggested that researchers include these raw dialogues as data in scholarly research reports. If participants disagree with analyses this does not automatically mean that a researcher's explanation is wrong. Depending on the situation, it may suggest a more complex interpretation or it might provide additional valuable data that can be used to build or modify hypotheses.

In this way, researcher and participant analyze data as a team; "the subject-object relationship of traditional science gives way to a subject-subject one" (Reason, 1994, p. 328). Granted, these methods in no way emulate full participatory action research (Sarri & Sarri, 1992). However, even selected participatory approaches can enhance the translation of theory to practice.

PRESENT RESEARCH TO PRACTITIONERS

A third consideration for translating theory into practice is directly communicating research through field presentations or reports. There are 101 excuses for not doing so, ranging from blaming research participants (e.g., "They wouldn't understand," or "They don't care") to blaming the academic reward system (e.g., "I need to publish, not hang out with research participants"). Despite these excuses, reporting back to the field is an important and immediate way to translate scholarship to practice.

To do so effectively, researchers should give forethought to the ways practitioners might use information derived from scholarly analyses. As Schein (1992) pointed out, just as therapy can reveal things to an individual that are painful, organizational analyses can provide information that is not easy for research participants to hear. Therefore, scholars must go beyond dropping their organizational analyses in participants' in-boxes—literally or figuratively—to providing recommendations about how employees should best make sense of the research, especially if the information is negative, surprising, depressing, or could be used to punish certain employees. Indeed, Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong (2000) suggested that researchers should literally warn readers how *not* to read scholarly work so that it avoids being misappropriated or used to further marginalize nondominant groups (p. 127).

In addition, part of reporting back to the field means adapting to the audience. We should be considerate of participants' time and present information that members can understand and directly apply to their day-to-day activities. User-friendly research materials are also a plus; three-page outlines are usually preferable to 50-page academic reports. Another consideration includes creating presentations targeted not only to management but also to all employees who participated in or may be affected by the research.

Engaging in these activities can be time-consuming and frustrating, yet extremely rewarding. In the case of my correctional officer research (Tracy, 2001), I spent hours fashioning what I thought to be appropriate and helpful presentations. After getting it "just right," I practiced the presentations in front of a friend. His immediate reaction? "Well, it kinda sounds like you think that they do everything wrong." Argghh . . . back to the drawing board! After further modifying my critical tone and crafting better (shorter) take-away documents for participants, I delivered six different presentations: one to administrators at each organizational site and one to each shift of officers at each site. Based upon these presentations, I was contracted to lead a day-long training seminar for members of the Colorado Jail Association. During the workshop I facilitated brainstorming sessions in which participants themselves discussed ways they might better understand and manage certain organizational dilemmas.

After one of these presentations, two participants approached me to chat about the research. In the course of the conversation, one mentioned that he already knew most of the information I had presented. The other participant jumped in adding, "But we did not know how to say it." These two comments may point to the most salient reason for translating theory to practice: As Richardson (1995) suggested, "People make sense of their lives through the stories that are available to them and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories. . . . New narratives offer the patterns for new lives" (p. 213). In translating theory to practice, scholars provide alternative stories about organizational life, which can open the door for increased understanding, social action, and change.

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