

Reconsidering “Engaged Scholarship”

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I have become disenchanted with “engaged” scholarship. My concern revolves around the term’s use both as a category of activity and a claim regarding the character of our work. Thus, rather than narrate my “engaged” experiences, I present several concerns about the consequences of pursuing engaged scholarship, as the notion is traditionally expressed. My argument, ultimately, is not that organizational communication work should steer clear of application or social justice concerns, but that we should instead seek to develop uniquely communicative explanations of organizing that respond to significant social problems.

The interest in engagement is not unique to our field. A common refrain regarding the development of organization theory as a whole revolves around what has become known as the “rigor-relevance gap” (see *Journal of Management Studies*, vol. 46, issue 3, May 2009). The term implies that organization theory is either too far removed from the standards of precise and valid scientific explanation, or that it is too far removed from the exigencies and experience of the practitioners it intends to address. Across the organization studies field, the relevance side of the debate is clearly winning, as seen in the voluminous calls for research to be more “engaged” or “practical” (*Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 50, issue 4, August 2007; Bartunek, 2007; *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol. 36, issue 3, August 2008; McGrath, 2007; Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001; Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009; Van de Ven, 2007), a stance underscored in several addresses by presidents of the Academy of Management (Bartunek, 2003; Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000; Van de Ven, 2002). From the “engaged scholarship” perspective, the central task of organization studies is to develop knowledge about organizations and organizing that enables intervention in pressing social, economic, civic, and moral problems. Flyvbjerg’s (2006) argument for *phronesis* is a clear statement of this position: “we must

address problems that matter to groups in the local, national, and global communities in which we live, and we must do it in ways that matter” (p. 370).

Stated this way, who in his or her right mind could disagree? Certainly not me, though I would like to register several concerns about the field’s focus on engagement:

- It has the potential to commodify both knowledge and communication. Framing the practitioner as the craftsperson and the academic as the scientist (who has purportedly studied “how to do it”) not only produces a problematic relationship (against which action researchers argue, I should note), but (a) reduces knowledge to that which can be packaged in a form understandable to the other and which may be “sold,” rather than seeing knowing as a practice, and (b) encourages a conception of communication that renders interaction sequential, and where the “real” work occurs separately (the academic and the practitioner both do the work that garners rewards for them outside the presence of the other).
- It doesn’t distinguish. No one in the organizational communication field does “basic” research (the all-too-common foil), and everyone can lay claim to some version of engagement (which, I recognize, is the very idea behind the conference’s use of these personal statements), making one wonder what purpose the adjective serves. I fear the notion becoming a *shibboleth*¹.
- As I argued in both an *MCQ* Forum on the theory-practice relation (Kuhn, 2002), in the edited book that came from the Aspen conferences (Kuhn, 2005), and in conversations at these conferences in the past, I am unconvinced that organizational communication presently offers a theory of the organization well-suited to intervention. There are many smart people who do fabulously innovative and helpful projects, and I am in no way challenging any particular engagement. And I don’t have a particular model of theory in mind here—in fact, I think there’s good reason to be rather ecumenical in what “theory” looks like (as well as what counts as “scholarship”). But, as a field, we have not theorized adequately how and why communication is

axial to organizational existence, operations, boundaries, or performance, and our failure to do so leaves our engagements either derivative on other fields' conceptual models or unable to address the collective level of analysis. At an even more basic level, we have not presented an argument about whether organizations are aggregations of components, nexuses of contracts, or "real entities" (Phillips, 1992; Werhane, 1985)—and, as Seeger and Kuhn (in press) argue, we cannot sustain claims about organizations' ethical responsibilities without taking a stance on this issue.

Underlying these three claims is a belief that the interest in engaged scholarship, though a welcome conversational theme (both in organizational communication and across the organization studies field), has not facilitated conceptual development. To contribute to conceptual development, I argue that we should seek to produce answers to the following question: *What would organization theory look like if it took communication seriously?*

There is no single or simple answer to such a question, and I don't believe a search for a single or simple answer is a wise pursuit. There are two broad types of response: concerns for "ordering," which modify existing organization theory with an eye toward incorporating communicative explanations for the phenomena of concern, and "disordering," which involves a desire to see organization as a wider social concept and process, with the aim of constructing alternative social arrangements. Regardless of the route one pursues, pressing social problems should, I believe, serve as a foundation (or motivation) for our scholarship.

Yet I fear that organizational communication's interest in engaged scholarship leads scholars' trajectories away from generating answers to such questions, because there is little room to interrogate (and generate sophisticated responses to) how we conceive of communication in the first place, and little desire to develop thoroughgoing *communicative explanations* of organizing phenomena—and to argue for them against psychological and sociological forms of explanation. And until organizational

communication, as a field, commits to pursuing uniquely communicative forms of explanation (see Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009), we are unlikely to produce either novel engagements or novel theorizing—as well as interesting intersections of the two.

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¹ *Shibboleth* was a code word used in ancient times by residents of the Jordan River region who had developed dramatically different customs and speech communities. The Gileadites used the word to detect—and put to death—Ephraimites because the latter could not speak the first syllable (and thus said *sibboleth*). It now refers to distinctive expressions associated with particular groups, the misuse of which reveals one as an outsider.