Chapter 2
Working and Organizing as Social Problems:
Reconceptualizing Organizational Communication's Domain

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ABSTRACT

Typical renderings of the domain of organizational communication focus on topics, perspectives, and persons. These perspectives encourage an attention to the boundaries surrounding the field, but have little to offer questions about the relevance of the field's work to pressing social problems. Consequently, I explore how we might enhance our scholarship's capability to engage with important social problems. I start with a discussion of problems encountered in working and organizing under contemporary capitalism, and then consider how novel conceptions of organization and communication can generate novel questions into, and insights about, these problems. Specifically, I argue for the relevance of attending to the "gig economy" and the precarity associated with it, and highlight the value of a relational ontology of communication as a vehicle for heurism and engagement with social problems.

INTRODUCTION

At the conference from which this book was born, the theme of organizational communication's domain began with the following prompt: What are, and what should become, the important areas of scholarship in organizational communication? In this chapter, I suggest that such a framing (a framing for which I was responsible at the conference) is an unhelpful approach to thinking about domain. In this chapter, I first interrogate the assumptions behind that question, and present a vision of organizational communication's domain that focuses on social problems. I argue that when we examine working and organizing under contemporary capitalism, we foreground problems and possibilities that summon new conceptions of organization and communication. My thesis is that we typically think of domain in terms of topics, perspectives, and persons, but that focusing instead on problems is likely to be a more fruitful path for enhancing the impact of organizational communication scholarship.

QUESTIONING THE QUESTION

What is implied in the question presented above? If our domain is about what we address, less than the *how*, it is largely about boundaries. We might then ask how we might more accurately discern our field's boundaries, how we might attain a modicum of agreement on those boundaries, and how those boundaries might be broadened. A chapter on domain would, then, be expected to catalogue the topics and perspectives used in the field, and might also suggest the persons who qualify as being inside its boundaries because of their departmental or disciplinary affiliations. Moreover, if we assume that the current version of our domain is wrong—if it is either too narrow or too broad—then the question we should be asking would seem to be where we should establish its boundaries. The problem with boundaries-based thinking is that it encourages us to envision contained areas and, in so doing, provides the semblance of a coherent (and clearly demarcated) field. Of perhaps more concern, contained areas run the risk of driving what we think and do. Andrew Abbott (2004) describes an epiphany, attained in the shower, that led to his well-known article "Things of Boundaries," where he came to think of boundaries as ontologically prior to the formation of groups, organizations, professions, and perhaps even nations:

The edges come first, then the thing, as if we created nations by having a border with place A and another discontinuous border with place B, and yet another with C, and so on, and then we hooked them up to make something continuous, and all of a sudden there was an inside and an outside, and we called the inside a nation (pp. 126-127).

This thinking is an interesting reversal for theorizing social organization because it suggests an unacknowledged influence over topics and perspectives attributable to the boundaries.

Over the past 20 years, scholars who affiliate with the organizational communication field seem less interested in jurisdictional conflicts (i.e., who gets to study what--and who doesn't) than they are with addressing pressing social and organizational problems. "Relevance" is a key trope in much recent organizational communication scholarship (Deetz & Eger, 2014; Simpson, & Shockley-Zalabak, 2005). In other words, I sense less interest in boundaries than in utility. This interest aligns with Weber's (1958) re-working of Tolstoy's claim that "Science is meaningless because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important to us, 'What shall we do and how shall we live?'" (Weber, 1958, p. 121). Choices about "doing" and "living" are not addressed well by thinking of topics, perspectives, or persons (the typical conceptions of domains); those choices are, instead, sites of struggle open for contestation and imagination. The trope of relevance is an effort to engage with Weber's question.

So, instead of clarifying what organization or communication are—as if there were an objective conceptualization upon which people in our field might agree—a fruitful question to begin to reconceptualize its domain, then, is what we should believe "org comm" to be so that it can be relevant, so it can exercise utility? Another way of saying this is that a question superior to the one offered at the aforementioned conference might be this: What do we need to make organizational communication to be such that it can address important social problems?

Investigating important social problems requires an understanding of the practices, organizations, projects, and institutions to which we devote much of our doing and living. It requires a conception of the options for doing and living within, and against, those practices and institutions. The primary and overarching institution upon and through which working and organizing occur is, unsurprisingly, capitalism. Even if we are interested in organizational practices where profits and losses are not computed,

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