

## Chapter 16

# Reworking Resistance: A Postcolonial Perspective on International NGOs

**Jenna N. Hanchey**

*The University of Texas at Austin, USA*

### ABSTRACT

*Scholars recognize that both nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and non-Western organizational logics harbor the potential to reconfigure fundamental assumptions of organizational research. Drawing from such work, I argue that we must reconceptualize ‘resistance’ in organizational communication scholarship by destabilizing its Western-centric assumptions and logics. I do so by engaging in a postcolonial analysis of scholarship on international NGOs, and drawing out typical assumptions of organizational communication work that do not hold under all cultural conditions, or that are imperialistic in nature. Answering calls to center alternative forms of organizing and to draw deeper relations between critical intercultural and organizational communication research, this study asks scholars to resist typical theorizations of ‘resistance,’ and decolonize organizational theory.*

### INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, many academic fields have realized the growing importance of the nonprofit sector to contemporary organizing processes and social change. In organizational communication, Lewis’s (2005) influential article marked a turning point in studies of nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), after scholars began to study such organizations as important in themselves, rather than using them as examples of theories generalizable across all organizations. Following Lewis’s article, organizational work on NGOs has been and is still on the rise (Koschmann, 2012), and scholars recognize that “the increasing interest... in the dizzying array of organizations located in the space between the market and the state” is “long overdue” (Schwabenland, 2014, p. 421).

Even as NGOs constitute an important part of up-and-coming, innovative theoretical work, scholarship on international organizations is also on the rise (Kramer, Lewis, & Gossett, 2015; Pal & Buzzanell, 2013). As corporations and NGOs increasingly serve and employ people from a variety of cultural

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backgrounds, geographic locations, and economic circumstances, the role of international and intercultural analyses becomes increasingly imperative to rigorous organizational scholarship. Thus, the point of intersection between NGOs and international organizations is a salient and urgent space to research (Norander & Harter, 2012).

This growing and critical sector forms the basis for my investigation into the way resistance is conceptualized and studied in organizational communication. Scholars recognize that both NGOs (Koschmann, 2012; Lewis, 2005) and non-Western organizational logics (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; A. Prasad, 2003) harbor the potential to reconfigure some of the fundamental presuppositions of organizational research, as “even basic concepts contain cultural assumptions” (Zaharna, 2016, p. 205). Answering calls to center alternate forms of resistance (Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005; Prasad & Prasad, 2003a) and to draw deeper relations between critical intercultural and organizational communication research (Allen, 2010; Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005), this study opens previously untapped conceptual space through a postcolonial analysis of organizational phenomena.

In this essay, I draw from postcolonial work in organizational communication and organization studies, primarily, in order to re-read current work in the field on international NGOs from a perspective sensitive to (neo)colonial power dynamics. I begin by examining the relationship between (neo)colonial power relations and international NGOs, arguing that a framework attendant to such power dynamics is necessary to address three levels of relation in which international NGOs are enmeshed: the macro level of international relations, the mezzo level of organizational dynamics, and the micro level of interpersonal relations. Next, I draw forth three ways that a postcolonial organizational framework calls us to resist current framings of resistance, each of which has implications across the levels of power dynamics: resisting subject-led ideas of resistance, resisting polarized framings of resistance, and resisting organizationally-contained conceptualizations of resistance. Applying these insights across the macro, mezzo, and micro levels, I theorize postcolonial resistance at each level of interaction and analysis. Finally, I describe the theoretical implications of reworking resistance for organizational communication scholarship writ-large.

## POSTCOLONIALISM AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS

The dynamics involved in studying international NGOs demand attention to postcolonialism for two main reasons. First, the power relationships of which NGOs are a constitutive element require an attention to postcolonial critique. Dempsey (2012) argues that “[t]he development of richer theories of nonprofits must include a sustained focus on how communication and organizing are inextricably linked with power” (p. 147), since such forms of organizing are not outside of power, and in fact add their own unique dynamics. Postcolonial theory is well-suited to critique power relations involving international and intercultural dynamics, as it:

*Seeks to understand (neo)colonialism and other related phenomena by means of investigating the role therein not only of Western political and economic practices, but also ...of Western culture, knowledge, and epistemology. (Prasad & Prasad, 2003b, p. 284)*

Second, postcolonial theory is necessary to open possibilities constrained or hidden under traditional Western analytical frameworks. Norander and Harter (2012) point toward the possibility of postcolonial

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