

Chapter 17

Imagination, Action, and Justice:

Trends and Possibilities at the Intersection of Organizational Communication and Social Justice

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ABSTRACT

Social justice connects to trends in organizational communication scholarship. Some organizational communication traditions engage, explicitly and implicitly, social justice concepts, such as fairness, equity, freedom, structure, and poverty. Drawing on these rich traditions, even more opportunities exist for conducting organizational communication scholarship that promotes justice. This essay articulates how the theory–practice conversation can be forwarded to enable social justice-oriented scholarship. Communication scholarship can do more justice if it is understood as contributing to the “communicative imaginary” as opposed to only developing theory. The communicative imaginary is the splendid array of social possibilities that humans use to create and recreate ways of living together and sharing in one another’s lives. Heroism, tragedy, comedy, and beauty are four frames within the communicative imaginary that enable the pursuit of justice. The essay concludes with a reflection on how solidarity can configure scholars’ lives in meaningful and just ways.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational communication has grown to become a vivid body of scholarship that takes seriously the intersection between conceptual, active, and critical dimensions of communication. As a discipline, we regularly take up questions and issues that improve human life (Cheney, 2007). We do scholarship that matters. We share ideas that help people to better understand other people, critique social processes to

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reveal problems (Mumby, 1997), and solve problems (Tracy, 2007), but how can organizational communication scholarship do the greatest possible good?

One answer to that question is to articulate how “the greatest possible good” is productively understood within the tradition of social justice. Social justice vividly connects to trends in organizational communication scholarship (Hartnett, 2010). Social justice connects to trends in organizational communication scholarship in various ways. Some organizational communication traditions explicitly and implicitly engage social justice concepts like fairness, equity, freedom, structure, and poverty. Drawing on these rich traditions, even more opportunities exist for creating organizational communication scholarship that does justice. This paper articulates how the theory-practice conversation can be forwarded to demonstrate social justice opportunities. Ultimately, communication scholarship can do more justice if it is understood as contributing to the “communicative imaginary” as opposed to only developing theory. The communicative imaginary is the splendid array of social possibilities humans use to create and recreate our ways of living together and sharing in each other’s lives. Heroism, tragedy, comedy, and beauty are four frames within the imaginary that enable the pursuit of justice. The essay concludes with a reflection on how the social justice concept of solidarity can meaningfully and justly configure our scholarly lives.

BACKGROUND: WHAT HAVE WE MADE TOGETHER?

There are many ways to make organized life “better.” Although an improvement anyplace “makes the world better,” taking a social justice orientation means emphasizing the improvements that most positively impact the people whose lives are the hardest. In this section, I outline the connection between key social justice and organizational communication concepts and trends.

A Social Justice Primer

The term “social justice” often is used ambiguously to signal an overarching concern with fairness in society. As an ambiguous term, it has strategic value: It can serve as a common rallying point for people who, otherwise, might have differing politics or ideologies; and it can signal shifts in ways of thinking without enumerating them explicitly. However, for the sake of my arguments here, clarity serves better than ambiguity. Three key notions relate productively to questions of an organizational communication that promotes justice: the preferential option for those who are poor, attention to the production and reproduction of social structures, and solidarity.

The notion of a “preferential option for those who are poor” comes from Catholic social teaching (see, e.g., Dorr, 1992; Kim, 2012) and suggests that those who are poor should have the most urgent moral claim on people’s efforts and attentions (Francis, 2014). Specific attention to poverty has its roots in Christian holy texts, but it also has garnered more theological attention at various points in history. Specifically, in the 1800s, figures such as Pope Leo XIII and Jesuit priest Luigi Taparelli articulated the importance of seeking social equity for those who were impoverished as a central goal of human life (Behr, 2003). More recently, Catholic thinking in Latin America, from figures such as Fr. Pedro Arrupe and Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez, has forwarded the idea that poverty, marginalization, and inequity should inform understandings of the good, real, and true (Kim, 2012). Although social justice has not received unqualified support from Catholic thinkers (e.g., Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, argued that the Catholic

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