

## Critical Interpretive Research in Organizational Communication

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Tremendous progress has been made in the development of scientific approaches to the study of human communication during the twentieth century. While research during this time has been dominated by positivistic, natural science modeled concepts and methods, a more holistic, meaning centered, tradition has developed in European writings. During the past twenty years this second tradition has become of much greater interest to American researchers in the social sciences. The foundations for this second tradition, referred to generically as the interpretive paradigm, are ancient. Its roots lie with the sophists; its development as the hidden side of the western tradition emerged with clarity in the writings of Vico, and its recollection as the foundation for the human sciences by Dilthey. The development of the interpretive paradigm in the social sciences in the twentieth century has continued through the writings in philosophical hermeneutics and the sociological work spawned by Weber.<sup>1</sup> Discussions of the interpretive paradigm are present in nearly every discipline's literature<sup>2</sup> and are available in several excellent collections.<sup>3</sup> Both communication<sup>4</sup> and organizational<sup>5</sup> theorists have shown great interest.

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<sup>1</sup>Zigmunt Bauman, *Hermeneutics and Social Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Thomas Farrell and James Aune, "Critical Theory and Communication: A Selected Literature Review," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 65 (1979), 93-107; "Bibliography," *Phenomenology in Rhetoric and Communication*, ed. Stanley Deetz (Washington D.C.: Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and the University Press of America, 1981); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); and Alan Gauld and John Shotter, *Human Action and Its Psychological Investigation* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

<sup>3</sup>Fred Dallmayr and Thomas McCarthy, eds., *Understanding and Social Inquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977); Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); and Paul Connerton, ed., *Critical Sociology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

<sup>4</sup>Stanley Deetz, "An Understanding of Science and a Hermeneutic Science of Understanding," *Journal of Communication*, 23 (1973), 139-159; Deetz, "Interpretive Research in Communication," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 3 (1977), 53-69; Leonard Hawes, "Toward a Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Communication," *Communication Quarterly*, 25 (1977), 30-41; Michael Hyde, "Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: A Seen but Unobserved Relationship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 65 (1979), 347-363; and Lawrence Grossberg and Jesse Delia, "Interpretation and Evidence," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 41 (1977), 33-37.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Frost, "Toward a Radical Framework for Practicing Organizational Science," *The Academy of Management Review*, 5 (1980), 501-508; Garth Morgan and Linda Smircich, "The Case for Qualitative Research," *The Academy of Management Review*, 5 (1980), 491-500;

In spite of this work, the acceptance and use of the interpretive paradigm have been hampered by misunderstandings, some perpetuated by the representatives themselves. The frequent conceptualization of the interpretive paradigm in opposition to more traditional scientific research has reduced its clarity as a positive approach in its own right. As Evered and Louis demonstrated, some of the contrasting poles have been useful, e.g., thick/thin description, concept formation/concept application, or logic-in-use/reconstructed logic; and others misleading, e.g., ideographic/nomothetic, qualitative/quantitative, or subjective/objective.<sup>6</sup>

In this paper I will develop a critically based position within the more general interpretive paradigm. This position, I feel, represents the most recent theoretical developments and offers the greatest value to organizational communication researchers. For the sake of readability, I will generally refer to this particular position simply as interpretive. To develop this position, I will explore the nature of meaning and meaning structures in organizations, present a set of basic goals for interpretive research, discuss methodological guidelines, and finally sketch criteria for evaluating interpretive research reports. Obviously, each discussion will be brief. The intent of the paper is to show that interpretive research need not be a less rigorous means to acquiring information to supplement or frame scientific studies aimed at verifiable knowledge, but is a rigorous approach to acquiring a different kind of knowledge which serves as a necessary complement to that gathered from most traditional studies of organizations.

## ORGANIZATIONS AS CULTURES

The conceptualization of organizations as cultures is central to much of the interest in interpretive approaches to research.<sup>7</sup> The concept of culture as a guiding metaphor for organizational study directs attention to the variety of activities, beyond simply getting the job done, which constitute organizational life. These activities include interpersonal relations, joke and storytelling, advice to new members, and so forth. But the concept not only directs attention to a new set of phenomena, it focuses analysis on the processes by which the meanings of organizational events are produced and sustained through communication. Culture serves both as a description of the organization of activities and meaning in organizations, its structure, and as a description of the activities by which these meanings come to be

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Roger Evered and Meryl Louis, "Alternative Perspectives in the Organizational Sciences: 'Inquiry from the Inside' and 'Inquiry from the Outside,'" *The Academy of Management Review*, 6 (1981), 385-396; Gibson Burrell and Gareth Morgan, *Sociological Paradigms and Organizational Analysis* (London: Heinemann, 1979); J. K. Benson, "Organizations: A Dialectical View," *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 22 (1977), 1-21; and Stewart Clegg and David Dunkerley, *Organization, Class and Control* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

<sup>6</sup>Evered and Louis, p. 391.

<sup>7</sup>Michael Pacanowsky, "An Analysis of Organizational Culture: A Theoretical Overview," paper presented to the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Philadelphia, 1979.

produced and shared in organizations, its structuration.<sup>8</sup> An organization's culture consists of whatever a member must know or believe in order to operate in a manner understandable and acceptable to other members and the means by which this knowledge is produced and transmitted.

The trouble with this rather standard description of organizations as cultures is that meaning is often conceptualized as centered in the individual and the research conducted is naturalistic and uncritical. When meaning is centered in the individual, communication and social interaction become merely the means by which consensus is reached and meaning is shared. This position is both philosophically and empirically unsound. The first thesis I wish to pursue is that individual meanings are not primary but arise from deeper meaning structures and that talk is epistemic—knowledge is produced in talk, not simply transmitted and shared. Secondly, I wish to suggest that describing the meaning that exists and is shared in organizations is insufficient. Research should perform a critical function by demonstrating where false consensus exists and the means by which it is constructed.

### *Meaning and Interpretation in Organizations*

In this section of the paper I will develop the nature of the human interpretive process and the character of meaning in culture as a necessary foundation for doing interpretive research in organizations. Despite the wide acceptance of Hanson's claim that "seeing is theory laden," many fail to take seriously how thoroughly conceptual perception is.<sup>9</sup> Interpretation is still frequently seen as a subjective process by which meaning is given to already formed objects. To be sure, such interpretations do take place and are important; but such a conception overlooks how interpreted these objects are prior to this assignment of meaning. A simple example should illustrate this point. If a pile of letters is on one's desk, the individual will surely have feelings about them and assign meaning to them. But letters are not simply naturally occurring objects. They are conceptualized, meaningful objects in the organization. To understand adequately the organizational culture, one must not only make strange the actors' subjective interpretations, but the phenomenon of letters themselves as a presumed real object need to be made "strange" (no longer taken for granted).

This is the notion the philosophers have worked out in their attempt to describe the fundamental character of understanding.<sup>10</sup> All seeing is *seeing as*. This *seeing as*, though having derivative modes as in assertive claims, is the direct perception in the everyday lives of organizational members. Whether through the use of the eyes, carefully designed instruments, or

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<sup>8</sup>Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup>Norwood Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965).

<sup>10</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. MacQuarrie and Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962); and Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Barden and Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

knowledge acquisition methods, every perception comes from an orientation and is meaningful in the first sense in and through that orientation.<sup>11</sup> Even those things that are confusing and senseless are so from a particular orientation. In this sense all knowledge is relational or positional rather than personal. Personal knowledge and claims about objective reality are all formed out of and on the basis of this first sense. Interpretive research is thus to analyze organizational reality — what is presumed as real — as well as its social reality — consensually shared subjective interpretations.

An expansion of this idea of orientation in the *seeing as* is useful. Let me go back to the simple case of the letters. The member's orientation to the pile of letters is considerably different when s/he has a report due, when looking for a person to fill a key role in the organization, or when attempting to order new stationery. Even the meaning of the texture and quality of the paper shifts radically. But these orientations and meanings are not simply the member's. They are real activities and meanings in the organization taken up by the member in fulfilling organizational roles.

The *seeing as*, thus, is the not-yet-brought-to-awareness conceptual part of all perception. But these concepts are not essentially the member's own. They are borrowed from the larger society and from the particular organization of which the member is a part. They form a core part of the member's orientation to seeing and allow something to be *seen as* in a particular way. Furthermore, they are thoroughly social. The member's interpretations and knowledge arise out of this background knowledge. Members may take a different orientation and attempt to explore this background and even consciously reflect on it, but they do not escape a new background and historically developed set of social concepts. There is no privileged position either in an attempted escape to the subject's intent or the external world. Positional perception is always primary.

Although this background understanding is presumed for every perception, in its application to a particular existential situation (which it partially composes) new meaning and new concepts arise. These become habitualized and part of the background for new situations. As these become sedimented as the "way things are," they become institutionalized in various ways in the organization.<sup>12</sup> The institutionalization may take place in preferred ways of talking, stories, artifacts, physical arrangements, new organizational positions, and particular ways of doing things. As such, they orient members' perceptions and provide meaning for organizational activities and objects. From this assumed institutional background activities are coordinated, and new meanings are negotiated. In this sense culture serves as more than a metaphor for organizations but describes the systems of meaning inscribed and made manifest in various institutional forms. To these sys-

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<sup>11</sup>The concept of orientation is worked out most carefully by Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 231ff.

<sup>12</sup>Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner, "Arnold Gehlen and the Theory of Institutions," *Social Research*, 32 (1965), 110-115.

tems of meaning, rather than to actor's meanings, interpretive research in organizations must be directed. This non-ostensive reference of all systems of signification is the core of all analyses.

Of all the institutional forms, language has a special position. All other institutional forms may be translated into language. A transitive relation does not hold. Further, every perception is dependent on the conceptual apparatus which makes it possible and meaningful, and this conceptual apparatus is inscribed in language. Talk and writing are thus much more than the means of expression of individual meanings; they connect each perception to a larger orientation and system of meaning. The conceptual distinctions in an organization are inscribed in the systems of speaking and writing. Speaking and writing are thus epistemic. They provide the possibility for having a perception in each and every report of one. Language is also the form that all reports to the organization or wider community must finally take and the form into which organizational attempts at self-reflection are put.

### *The Text as Model and Object of Analysis*

Whereas many traditional researchers of organizations assume their own concepts as a priori categories for recording organizational activities and miss the culture that is present, many under the name of interpretive research try to reconstruct actor's meanings and also miss the systems on which they are based.<sup>13</sup> Just as the reality outside of human conception is impossible to reach, since we always come at it from some orientation with some methods or instruments, the interior of subjects is also beyond our grasp for different reasons. More importantly from an organizational point-of-view, neither the thing-in-itself nor the uncharted psyche without manifestation is of much interest. Interpretive research needs to be principally concerned with that which is public but unseen. This is not to say that an interpretive researcher is uninterested in what organizational members think is real or how they think and feel, but these are manifested only through more talk and action. Asking organizational members what they mean generates more talk, not privileged insight. We can not get in back of the talk, we can only get more talk until we are satisfied that we have discovered coherence: meaning which is then sometimes assumed as the actor's meaning. But as members talk, they clarify and change their own meaning. They thus put it in a new context and form new conceptions. Communication is irreversible.

Furthermore, interpretive analysis is rarely done of member's talk but rather of recordings of it: notes taken during an interview, and written reports of various forms. Rather than taking these as problems to be overcome, I wish to suggest that analysis is always of *texts, inscribed discourse*, and that forms of textual analysis are the appropriate means of

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<sup>13</sup>Deetz, pp. 139-143.

study. As Ricoeur, following Dilthey, suggested, *Auslegung* (interpretation, exegesis of documents) rather than *Verstehen* (understanding, comprehension of signs as expression of psychic life), is the appropriate procedure.<sup>14</sup> The goal of data collection is not perfectly reproducing talk (even if the positionality of all recording could be overcome<sup>15</sup>) but bringing it anew so that it reveals its deeper significance in its relevance to the current task. In this sense notes may be more effective than video recordings, planned documents better than spontaneous speech, and fiction better than prose in the written report, if only because they explicitly remind the researcher of their positionality. Because of historical and cultural differences, saying the same thing frequently requires saying it differently. The goal is the reproduction of the content rather than its first manner of presentation. This becomes clearer with a development of the concept of text.

Ricoeur in his now classic article, "The Model of Text," characterizes the difference between the speech event and inscribed discourse.<sup>16</sup> Since this piece is familiar to many, I will summarize the analysis in an extremely brief form. (1) Discourse takes place in time, has its time, and passes away. It is characterized by its forgetfulness and malleability. Inscriptions are taken out of time. They may be returned to, and they persevere. (2) Discourse has a speaker who is self-referenced, who may be appealed to for clarification. Inscriptions take on a life of their own, the text has its own meaning. (3) Discourse is about *a* world, a situation common to speaker and listener; it makes ostensive reference. Inscriptions are taken out of their situation, they make reference to *the* world. (4) Discourse has a listener to whom it is addressed. Inscriptions are addressed to anyone who can read. Obviously, these points are overcharacterized, but they reveal a basic ontological difference between two realms of experience.

Since the time of Plato the attempt has been to reclaim speaking from writing to make up for the apparent deficiencies of the inscription.<sup>17</sup> The same can be seen in much writing in the human sciences. In spite of these "apparent" deficiencies, inscription has its own superiority in its permanence and materiality. The deficiencies are overcome in relooking at life in the organization. The time, the situation, the speaker, and listener are constructions, place markers for orientations which frame the meaning of organizational perception. They are thinkable constructs, fictions, which are thinkable and conceptualized. They are recoverable from the inscrip-

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<sup>14</sup>Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," *Social Research*, 38 (1971), 529-562.

<sup>15</sup>This position is carefully developed by Vivian Sobchack, "Towards Inhabited Space," *Semiotica*, in press; and Beryle Bellman and Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *A Paradigm for Looking* (Norwood New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Company, 1977). A general review of the literature denying the possibility of any "realist" text can be found in Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

<sup>16</sup>Ricoeur.

<sup>17</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

tions by asking who, when, and where; but the orientations are inscribed in the text as the grounding for the text's meaning.<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of this discussion we can follow Ricoeur further. The relation between discourse and inscription applies not only to verbal expression but to all organizational activities. Behavioral acts are also inscribed as products, artifacts, and material changes. As the act passes away, these inscribed traces remain to be read. Some may suggest that this is a new radical behaviorism. It may be; but if so, it is one concerned with the explication and understanding of meaning rather than "literal" descriptions leading to prediction and control.

The organization is composed of a multiplicity of texts standing in conflicting, contradictory, and mutually supportive relations to each other. As Geertz suggested, "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles. . . ."<sup>19</sup> The function of interpretive research is to learn to read texts in their full variety, rather than to get beneath or behind them. These texts serve as the reality for the organization. There is no way out of them to some other reality. The best that can happen is a participation in their continued development. Communication in an organization is better conceptualized as intertextuality than intersubjectivity—the interplay of texts rather than subjective agents. In this interplay organizations continue to form. This concept obviously needs far more development in terms of organizations than I can give here, but important directions are given in several available works.<sup>20</sup>

## GOALS OF INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH

If the object of study with an interpretive approach is texts and activities treated as texts, the goals of interpretive research are seen as those of textual analysis. Exegesis and explication are a central part of this analysis. But what of value is obtained by textual analysis? And what does the organizational researcher accomplish by doing this? I will present three goals which I believe to be substantially different from those accomplished in most current organizational research. They are (1) richer understanding of naturally occurring events, (2) criticism of false consensus and the forces which sustain them, and (3) the expansion of the conceptual base from which organizational members think and work. Each of these goals requires some development.

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<sup>18</sup>A general review of the literature on textuality can be found in Samuel Ijsseling, "Hermeneutics and Textuality: Questions Concerning Phenomenology," *Research in Phenomenology*, 9 (1979), 1-16; and Deetz, "Hermeneutics, Textuality, and Communication Research," *Communication*, in press.

<sup>19</sup>Geertz, in Rabinow and Sullivan, p. 222.

<sup>20</sup>Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, 1970); and Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974).

### *Understanding: The Disclosure of "Deep" Meaning Structures*

The first major goal of interpretive research is the creation of insight. In this section I contend that *insight* is a form of knowledge in its own right, and I follow that claim with a discussion of the role of insight in organizational research. Smircich presented this goal clearly: "The interpretive researcher of an organizational culture tries to uncover the structures of meaning in use in a setting and to synthesize an image of that group's reality and to make it available for consideration and reflection by the group members."<sup>21</sup>

The importance of insight is clear in the phenomenological demonstration that a more essential level of knowing underlies all everyday knowledge and scientific research. Most of the time organizational members, as well as traditional researchers, take for granted this knowledge and the formed nature of organizational objects and events. Insight serves as reflected knowledge which raises to a level of awareness the manner of producing this knowledge and the forming of the objective character of objects and events. This insight may range from understanding that a particular college dean's offering a cup of coffee is not just a social gesture, but that the acceptance of it signifies a willingness to engage with him as a human being rather than just to ask, get what you want, and run; to understanding the power of definition of the entire language system in an organization. In this sense insight is not merely in the service of the understanding of a particular person or situation but the understanding of the system of meanings from which this situation is composed and connected to the larger sociocultural context. In Geertz' sense it is an interest in "deep structure" which understanding the particular story, activity, or object allows the research to follow out.<sup>22</sup> The particular situation opens insight into the system of meanings which it manifests.

Insight is important to the organization and organizational member by reframing knowledge and giving choices that previously were hidden by the accepted knowledge, standard practices, and existing concepts. Without such reflected knowledge, members remain in a sense victims of meaning structures that were developed in response to past situations and perpetuated in their talk and actions. It is unlikely that organizations themselves can generate this insight, due to their interest in responding to their perception of the situation and simply getting the job done.

Insight is also a form of generalizable knowledge produced by the researcher. Meaning structures cut across situations and organizations. Understanding them serves as a basis for understanding how organizations function. Knowledge is acquired both about the meaning structure present in the production of knowledge and meaning in particular organizations and the general processes by which such knowledge and meaning is pro-

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<sup>21</sup>Linda Smircich, "The Concept of Culture and Organizational Analysis," paper presented at the SCA/ICA Conference on Interpretive Approaches to the Study of Organizational Communication, Alta, Utah, 1981, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup>Geertz.

duced. Further analysis can reveal the connection of these structures to wider sociocultural meaning systems and the forces in society which produce and sustain these structures.

Unfortunately insight has been seen as that produced by an insightful person, as a kind of art or knack. Insight, however, can be seen as the result of rigorous scientific analysis. Later, I will suggest methodological guidelines for such analyses. At this point let me suggest only that it requires considerable care in collecting the right information, but it is more than that. The care is different from that required by traditional scientific research and to a different end. As Rorty so nicely expressed it, "setting the facts right . . . is merely propaedeutic to finding new and more interesting ways of expressing ourselves, and thus of coping with the world."<sup>23</sup>

### *Criticism: Opening the Possibility of Further Discourse*

Insight, though interesting, is never sufficient in the analysis of organizations. Whereas insight undermines the realist assumption that things are as they appear, every individual implicitly and every psychiatrist explicitly knows that insight into what things mean and how they are formed is rarely sufficient for change. Interpretive research, to be useful, must become critical. Critical-interpretive research has as a goal appropriately directed action as well as understanding. As Goldman and van Houten and Nord argued, organizational research has frequently failed to explore the economic, political, and community influences on the organization's definition of problems, perception of events, and formulation of response.<sup>24</sup> This failure, coupled with the managerial bias of much organizational research, has limited much of the knowledge acquired about organizations. Interpretive research need not fall victim to the same criticism and is in a better position to tackle these problems.

Organizations can be filled with contradictions and formed in such a way as to alienate the individual. Decisions are manipulated, data are distorted, and power is inevitably distributed unequally. Organizational members approach their tasks with special interests, and their perceptions are interested perceptions. Political, economic, and community forces and individual interests are inscribed in organizational arrangements, social relations, and in every perception. As Frost, following Habermas, suggests, these inscribed interests result in blockages, repressions, and distorted communication.<sup>25</sup> Meaning structures are filled with privileged interests, and from these perceptions of objects and events are formed. It is not sufficient to describe these as naturally occurring, for the rightful value of all knowledge is the improvement of human existence.

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<sup>23</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 359.

<sup>24</sup>P. Goldman and D. van Houten, "Managerial Strategies and the Worker," *Organizational Analysis*, ed. J. Benson (London: Sage, 1977); and W. Nord, "Dreams of Humanization and the Realities of Power," *Academy of Management Review*, 3 (1978), 674-679.

<sup>25</sup>Frost, pp. 503-4; Jurgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979).

The task of critical-interpretive research is not only to reveal these blockages and repressions and the forces which sustain them, but also to provide appropriate action to overcome them. Key to this goal is the overcoming of systematically distorted communication. As such, research in organizational communication is critical to understanding change in organizations. Systematically distorted communication leads to false consensus, a consensus reached by the power of definition rather than by open discussion by all interested parties of the practical situation at hand. As Bauman suggested, the role of all interpretive research is the undermining of the conditions leading to false consensus.<sup>26</sup>

This is not merely a call for more and wider participation and free speech not subject to the fear of reprisal. The individual's meaning and knowledge are formed out of the underlying systems of meanings which can be themselves distorted. Individual illusions cannot be overcome without removing the conditions which make them necessary. Technical vocabularies and technical knowledge contribute to what Marcuse has called the closing of the universe of discourse.<sup>27</sup> The critical goal of interpretive research is to reopen discourse, i.e., to open the discursively formed reality of the organization to further discourse. This requires, as Frost said, "to bring individuals to full awareness of the repressions and blockages associated with power distribution,"<sup>28</sup> and, finally, to provide the forms by which they may be overcome.

Rhetorical action is central to this move. Rhetoric has usually been associated with the exercise of power — with the strategic move to force the will. As such it has been framed in opposition to dialectic and the discovery of truth. Valesio has given considerable guidance toward understanding rhetoric as on the side of truth and as opposed to ideology and the forces which sustain false consensus.<sup>29</sup> Rhetorical action provides the means of expression to overcome the power of the predominant definition. This will be discussed further in looking at research reports.

### *Education: Concept Formation in Organizations*

The final goal of interpretive research is the formation of new concepts for organizational members and researchers in such a way as to enhance understanding of organizational life and allow for undistorted discourse. Living and working in organizations are practical activities for organizational members. Particularly for new members and ones in new roles, but also for all others, there exists a need to know how things get done in the organization, how to avoid unpleasant outcomes, how to recognize critical features, and so forth. Researching organizations is also a practical activity for organizational researchers. They also need to know all the above as well

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<sup>26</sup>Bauman, p. 241.

<sup>27</sup>Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974).

<sup>28</sup>Frost, p. 503.

<sup>29</sup>Paolo Valesio, *Novantiqua: Rhetorics as a Contemporary Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

as with whom to talk, what counts as adequate information and data, etc. As Evered and Louis suggested, little of the current organizational theories and research helps the least in sorting these things out.<sup>30</sup> The kind of knowledge that is needed is "adequate knowledge" as suggested by Giddens,<sup>31</sup> *phronesis*—practical wisdom—as suggested by Gadamer,<sup>32</sup> or *praxis*—a knowledge of how to act appropriately in a variety of situations—as suggested by Evered and Louis,<sup>33</sup> rather than *theoria*—theoretical knowledge. This is precisely what the goal of understanding or insight in interpretive research offers. It needs to be acquired and taught as a complement to theoretical understanding. But this alone is not sufficient.

Individuals and organizations are constantly in the process of self-formation. Weick and Johnson make this clear in looking at the process of organizing.<sup>34</sup> Communication is central to this formation. For as Hawes argues, social collectivities are not reflected in communicative behavior; communication is not one of the things collectivities do, but rather collectivities *are* that communicative behavior.<sup>35</sup> Their being is their texts. They self-form in their communication. Meaning structures form and change, and the character of individuals and organizations are reclaimed from the meaning given to them. As Rorty cleverly puts it, "To say that we become different people, that we [remake] ourselves as we read more, talk more, and write more, is simply a dramatic way of saying that statements which become true of us by virtue of such activities are often more important to us than statements which become true of us when we drink more, eat more, and so forth."<sup>36</sup> The choice of language systems and the development of new concepts in an organization are not neutral activities but are an engaging in the very formation of individuals and organizations. Values and ethics take on a new significance given this understanding.

The importance of this becomes clearer in considering two key organization concepts—"bounded rationality" and "the law of requisite variety." Organizational participants operate with cognitive limitations, and an adequate conceptual system must be as sophisticated as the complex situations in which decisions must be reached. Such considerations led Daft and Wiginton to propose that a key purpose of research ought to be the enhancement of the natural language of organizational members.<sup>37</sup> This is also the case for organizational researchers.

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<sup>30</sup>Evered and Louis, p. 386.

<sup>31</sup>Giddens, p. 246.

<sup>32</sup>Gadamer, pp. 21 ff.

<sup>33</sup>Evered and Louis, p. 390.

<sup>34</sup>Karl Weick, *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, 2nd edition (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1979); and Bonnie Johnson, *Communication: The Process of Organizing* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1977).

<sup>35</sup>Leonard Hawes, "Social Collectivities as Communication: A Perspective on Organizational Behavior," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 60 (1974), 497-501.

<sup>36</sup>Rorty, p. 359.

<sup>37</sup>Richard Daft and John Wiginton, "Language and Organization," *The Academy of Management Review*, 4 (1979), 179-192.

On this basis, interpretive research, unlike most traditional research, must be interested in concept formation rather than concept application. In order to accomplish this in an undistorted fashion, attention has to be directed to the newness and difference of the practical situation to keep it from quickly being subsumed under a pre-existing category. The cognitive development literature has much to offer in this regard.<sup>38</sup> In the dialectic of the situation and the talk of individuals with different perspectives, the emergence of new ways of talking becomes possible. Such a process both enhances the natural language of the organization and leads to the development of new concepts to direct the attention of the research community. These concepts apply directly to the organization under study rather than needing interpretation for application like many theoretical terms.

### METHODOLOGICAL GUIDELINES

Accomplishing these goals requires reconsidering method and methodological guidelines for the conduct of scientific research. Such guidelines make possible the rigor necessary for interpretive research and support the claim that interpretive research can produce valid knowledge. In this section I will look at the concept of method in interpretive research and propose a set of guidelines for conducting such research.

#### *A New Look at Method*

Considerable debate over the role of method in the development of knowledge has taken place recently in philosophical circles. Much of this controversy has been generated from Gadamer's notion that "truth eludes the methodical man"<sup>39</sup> and Feyerabend's writings against method.<sup>40</sup> A possible outcome of this debate is clear for organizational studies in Giddens', *New Rules for Sociological Method*.<sup>41</sup> The focus of this debate is not truly against method per se as much as against method as it has come to be seen in the western world. Clearly many researchers have developed a kind of method fetish or have operated out of a kind of procedural sublimation. They have given their primary attention to epistemology over ontology and become much more concerned with how to conduct research than with the character of the phenomena being researched. Even when the ontology implicit in their methods conflicts with the explicitly assumed nature of the object of study, the methods have continued to be used. Monge and Smith show this clearly with their conception of communication as a process, yet they study it as if it were an object.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>For a review, see Siegfried Streufert and Susan Streufert, *Behavior in the Complex Environment* (Washington, D.C.: V. H. Winston & Sons, 1978).

<sup>39</sup>Gadamer.

<sup>40</sup>Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method* (New York: Schocken, 1975).

<sup>41</sup>Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

<sup>42</sup>Peter Monge, "The Systems Perspective," *Communication Quarterly*, 25 (1977), 26; and David Smith, "Communication Research and the Concept of Process," *Speech Monographs*, 39 (1972), 174-182.

Conducting research in the right manner has been frequently confused with being right. It is not only with their concepts but with their methods that researchers carry their own community's subjectivity into the organization and impose them over the phenomena there. When concepts and methods are held in an *a priori* fashion, they are not allowed to change to describe the phenomena on their own terms or in the terms of the organizational members. In contrast interpretive research methods, like concepts, must be changed in regard to the situated phenomena. At best methodological guidelines for interpretive research will assert the primacy of the object of analysis over preferred means of analysis and a set of principles to maintain this primacy. Rigor is possible in the maintenance of these principles rather than the following of a prescribed method or procedure.

The continuing debate over quantitative and qualitative methods misses the real issues. Many existing quantitative and qualitative methods may and need to be used in interpretive research. The issue is not the research methods but the use to which they are put and their relation to the phenomena under study. The appeal for the appropriateness of method needs to be made to the object of analysis, not the existing standards of a research community. Only in this way can research be objective—to allow the object to object. Not only tentative hypotheses and preformed concepts need to be put to the test in research but the methods of research themselves. Fortunately we do not have to begin anew in developing these guidelines. The traditional canons for text analysis are firmly, empirically, and philosophically grounded.<sup>43</sup> I will briefly describe them here in their application to organizational research.

*Organizational texts should be seen as autonomous and having integrity.* Evered and Louis provided an excellent description of inquiry from the inside—being immersed in the full variety of the organization on its own terms.<sup>44</sup> But we need to move beyond this description lest we fall victim to the “fallacy of subjectivism.” Organizational talk and activities need to be seen as texts rather than expressions, and mere reproduction of actors or researcher's subjective meanings is to be avoided. As texts, organizational talk and activities have their meaning within their own interrelationships, not from *a priori* theoretical concepts or the interpretation of actors or researchers. These interrelationships (confluences) standing on their own are the object of analysis. Although we see these interrelationships only in and through the interpretations of actors and researchers, the two levels are not to be confused. Every interpretation must finally be assessed by a return to the text.

The organizational text must take on the status of radical otherness. This is perhaps best conceptualized as a kind of loving relation. Levinas gives guidance here in his conception of the other person.<sup>45</sup> The others standing

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<sup>43</sup>Joseph Kockelmans, “Toward an Interpretative or Hermeneutic Social Science,” *New School Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 5 (1975), 73-96.

<sup>44</sup>Evered and Louis, p. 388-389.

<sup>45</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

there in their concrete otherness demand to be seen in their uniqueness beyond every conceptual scheme and institutional role. To genuinely relate to them is to come to them with one's concepts but to have those concepts overcome with their presence. The material being poses questions for each attempt to subsume them under a category. The materiality of the text has this status of radical other. It is a reminder that each and every interpretation cannot capture all that is there in its concrete uniqueness. This uniqueness is to be returned to in each progressive interpretation.

*The understanding which makes the text maximally reasonable and coherent should be sought.* It would be a great mistake to assume that either researchers or organizational actors are always, or even usually, reasonable or rational. Yet every unreasoned action articulates in a disguised or even distorted manner the conditions which makes it thinkable or necessary. These conditions can be rationally reconstructed.

Frequently levels of meaning are overlaid in such a way that the actors themselves do not understand why they act in the way they do, nor even fully what it would mean to do so. In these cases both systemic and historical analysis may be necessary to find the inherent logic which makes responses and meanings intelligible. One should not pass judgment on an individual without understanding the inherent logic which makes his or her actions meaningful. The imposition of external logics easily leads to judgments of incompetence and motivating forces where there is merely a lack of understanding. The most complete interpretation demonstrating maximum rationality should be preferred even when there are competing ones.

*The interpreter should strive for the greatest degree of familiarity with the data to be interpreted.* This is precisely the opposite principle from that followed by quantitative researchers who collect data by mass-distributed instruments, feed the responses into a computer, and interpret the set of relations exposed through the use of a general theory or set of criteria. Organizations are composed of a multiplicity of texts. Becoming aware of the greatest variety of them to determine what is representative and seeing through the easy meanings assigned to each of them are critical to analysis.

The question of representativeness is an important and difficult one. A simple example may help here. If we were to try to determine a community's taste in wine, should we choose the most popular wine or the one most respected by wine tasters? Both naturalistic and neopositivistic researchers have an easy answer. One should assess either the actors' (drinkers') ascribed preference or "objective" accounts of purchasing. But which assessment represents the community's taste? These are certainly texts which tell us something about the culture, but the wine tasters are representatives of the culture which epitomize something deep in every member's possible experience. The interpretive researcher must search for the texts which best represent what is thinkable and doable in the organization. This is what is essential in the organization and upon which every practical and contingent choice is based. It represents the culture of the organization in its greatest possibility.

*Interpretation is transactive.* Interpretation is formed in the hermeneutic circle. Friedman saw this clearly in his theory of community planning, but he was not able to go beyond the interplay of actors' interpretations.<sup>46</sup> Rather than interaction, formative co-action happens in the interpenetration of texts.

In the strongest sense this canon suggests that all human knowledge is developed through a dialectic process. The most basic aspect of this process is the tension between whole and part: the part has meaning only in terms of the whole, and the meaning of the whole is understood only from the meaning of the parts. Understanding is not a cumulative process but a transactive one. It is not the sum of test scores or indicators which aid understanding but the relations that exist between them in the individual cases which makes the array of activities make sense together. In the productive interrelation between parts, additional understanding of one part helps clarify the meaning of other parts, which in turn further clarifies the meaning of the first.

But the circle goes further than this. Every researcher and organizational member carries preunderstandings (prejudices to Gadamer) into every act of understanding. These preunderstandings are carried in concepts, methods, institutional roles, everyday practices, etc. The tradition has argued for giving these up either by suspicion that the actor is hiding something or in trying to set aside researcher bias. Even in phenomenology these prejudices are bracketed. Prejudices are given up in the hermeneutic circle but in an entirely new way. Rather than setting them aside at the beginning, they are to be articulated in their strongest most committed form.<sup>47</sup> Only in this way can they be radically questioned or tested by the text of the other. This is the sense of distance (or distanciation to Ricoeur) necessary for productive understanding.<sup>48</sup> Commonality is necessary for understanding to take place, but difference is necessary for it to be productive. The desire for productive understanding must guide the researcher, not the attempt to avoid misunderstanding.<sup>49</sup>

*Results of interpretive research should be applicable to the organization under study.* The sense of this canon is widely familiar to those doing ethnomethodology and naturalistic research. Accounts should be plausible to the organizational actors. This is, of course, based on Schutz' postulates of subjective interpretation and adequacy:

*The postulate of subjective interpretation:* In order to explain human actions the scientist has to ask what model of an individual mind can be constructed

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<sup>46</sup>John Friedmann, *Retracking America: A Theory of Transactive Planning* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1973).

<sup>47</sup>Gadamer, pp. 321-324.

<sup>48</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

<sup>49</sup>Stanley Deetz, "Conceptualizing Human Understanding," *Communication Quarterly*, 26 (1978), 12-23.

and what typical contents must be attributed to it in order to explain the observed facts as the results of the activity of such a mind in an understandable relation.

*The postulate of adequacy:* Each term in a scientific model of human action must be constructed in such a way that a human act performed within the life-world by an individual actor in the way indicated by the typical construct would be understandable for the actor himself as well as for his fellow-men in terms of common-sense interpretation of everyday life.<sup>50</sup>

Critical interpretive research must go further than this, however. The familiar must be made new again with new significance and relevance. As in classical hermeneutics in which the Bible must be brought to speak again in relevance to a new community, organizational texts must be given their autonomy yet reframed for the organization. The dialectically created new concepts reorganize perception in the organization in a way which is intelligible to the current organizational members. Unlike new theoretical concepts, these concepts need no interpretation or application to make them relevant. They are grounded in, yet reorient, organizational life. A generative, grounded theory is being created.<sup>51</sup>

## EVALUATING INTERPRETIVE RESEARCH

Evaluating interpretive research in organizational communication should not in principle be more difficult than good evaluation of traditional research. The legitimacy, validity, and significance of the study are central in any evaluation. The more formal criteria for evaluation given by traditional researchers rarely approach these concerns. Human judgment is always involved. In interpretive research this judgment is based on the demonstration of the manner of conformity to the methodological guidelines. Accepting this as an adequate basis for evaluation can be made clearer in a discussion of three standard problems in reporting research: objectivity, coherence, and rhetorical force.

### *The Problem of Objectivity*

The goal of objectivity for the interpretive researcher is not different from that of the traditional organizational researcher. Subjective, spurious, and ideologically based results are to be avoided in each case. This is the human interest in objectivity. Even the grounds for such determinations are not radically different. The conceptualized means for attainment and assessment, however, are. Ultimately the validity, legitimacy, and productivity of any research are judged by the wider community of investigators

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<sup>50</sup>Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers I: The Problems of Social Reality*, ed. Maurice Natanson (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962), pp. 43-44.

<sup>51</sup>Kenneth Gergen, "Toward Generative Theory," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30 (1978), 1344-1360. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1967).

and the organizational community to which reports are made. The report's ability to gather consensus is central.

Traditional researchers have assumed *a priori* criteria for judgment based more on replicability than verification. That anyone using the same procedure could have achieved the same results has always been the practice of judgment more than empirical verification. Apel has developed this theme in the concept of methodological solipsism.<sup>52</sup> Gergen, among many others, has demonstrated that replication rarely takes place even if it could in ongoing organizations, and that empirical grounding is largely self-fulfilling.<sup>53</sup> Traditional science has become an ideology. Consensus is based on an acceptance of this ideology.

Without such *a priori* criteria interpretive research evaluation must depend more on descriptions in the report of the conditions for producing the knowledge. Criteria must be specified in and emerge from the report. Data descriptions must be rich and compelling. Finally, the research community must be immediately and directly involved in posing questions for the research rather than making counter assertions. Objectivity is demonstrated by the way preconceptions and prejudices were tested and the representativeness of the data reported. Objectivity is sustained in the inability of the community to deny the results through undistorted discussion of them. Clearly a faith is placed in the researcher and community, but it is a faith which is necessary for all knowledge and a faith which is tested through further discourse.

### *The Problem of Coherence*

With the breakdown of foundationalist positions and the inability to assess validity by any simple appeal to the external world, coherence has emerged as the appropriate standard for determining the validity of knowledge claims.<sup>54</sup> But what is coherence? And how is a valid report to be distinguished from an elaborate and internally consistent fantasy? Are there any number of equally good reports of a particular organization? The full working out of these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, but some guidance can be given.

Coherence certainly includes the idea of logical consistency that Schutz developed. But coherence is more than that. It must also include principles of legitimacy, generic appropriateness, and comprehensiveness developed by Hirsch and outlined by myself in an earlier article.<sup>55</sup> Accepting coherence as a standard would suggest that, given different descriptions and

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<sup>52</sup>Karl Otto Apel, "The A Priori of Communication and the Foundation of the Humanities," *Man and World*, 5 (1972), 3-37.

<sup>53</sup>Kenneth Gergen, "Social Psychology as History." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26 (1973), 304-370.

<sup>54</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>55</sup>E. O. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 236; and Deetz, "An Understanding of Science," p. 154.

understandings of an organization, the report to be preferred would make maximally reasonable the actions in the organization consistent with the values, beliefs, and types of actions possible in the organization and making mutually understandable the greatest range of texts existing in the organization.

Coherence has, further, a deeper connection to community than these standards alone would imply. As Blanshard concluded, "What really tests judgement is the extent of our accepted world that is implicated with it and would be carried down with it if it fell. . . . That is the test of coherence."<sup>56</sup> It is more what would have to be denied if the understanding were not accepted than what it claims if accepted that determines coherence. The more thoroughly both researchers' and organizations' conceptions and understandings are put to test in the research, the more that is risked in the formation of understanding and the more that must be denied in the rejection of the understanding.

### *The Problem of Rhetorical Force*

The final standard for evaluating interpretive research concerns the relative amount of rhetorical force of the report. It is not sufficient that the outcome of research is to be defensible only in the ideal. It must also appeal to the actual community. It must form a *true* consensus—that is, one not based on prior unreflected beliefs and ideologies. Rhetoric is not used here to suggest the means by which adherence is gained, but in establishing the conditions through which the report can stimulate dialogue in the organization and wider community of investigators. The report cannot only make a claim, but must progressively radicalize argumentative discourse by raising questions about the warrants of each counter claim. The report is not merely a report of knowledge but is part of the ongoing production of knowledge in the organization and wider community. The degree of participation in this discourse, rather than the abstract quality of knowledge, serves to determine the rhetorical force of the report. The power of the report relates to its ability to demonstrate the need for continued self and concept formation and provide appropriate actions for accomplishing this formation.

The issues of ethics and responsibility come to the fore in this standard. Ethics has frequently been directed at the personal decision not to do harm to others or violate their human rights, but this conception has not provided the grounds for positive responsibility in the production of knowledge. Research results and concepts produced in research are not neutral; they influence the direction and character of individual and organization formation. The rhetorical appeal of interpretive research should open up this formation by exposing the conditions of closure and providing the means for responsible choice. Apel has developed in detail the nature of this ethical

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<sup>56</sup>Brand Blanshard, *The Nature of Thought* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939), vol. 2, p. 227. See also, Michael Williams, "Coherence, Justification, and Truth," *Review of Metaphysics*, 34 (1980), 243–272.

stance.<sup>57</sup> It is in need yet of clear development by the organizational researcher. Essentially, does the research report make possible more enlightened decision making and provide the means for the decision-making process?

### *Summary*

This essay has been an extremely brief overview of the nature of critical interpretive research in organizations. I have shown the positive direction of this new approach to organizational study through the conception of organizations as cultures and the presentation of the goals, methodological guidelines, and evaluative standards of organizational study. The essay is admittedly a gloss. It does more to outline the task and the issues needing to be worked out than give detailed instructions for conducting research, but such guidance is needed for any developing program of research. This is a unified position to focus the questions and discussion of it.

In some senses the task is so immense that the essay is little more than a reading list and a statement of the need to read it. The essay certainly should be read in conjunction with my earlier attempt to establish the task<sup>58</sup> and the several useful full-length works on the subject. Only with such a general understanding can the research being done from this approach be given a fair reading and have its rightful power to contribute to our further development of knowledge and progressive development of organizations and organizational members.

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<sup>57</sup>Karl Otto Apel, "The A Priori of the Communication Community and the Foundation of Ethics," *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, trans. Adey and Frisby (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), pp. 225-300.

<sup>58</sup>Deetz, "An Understanding of Science."

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