CHAPTER 20
CRITICAL THEORY OF COMMUNICATION APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONS

Outline

I.   Introduction.
    A. Stanley Deetz' critical communication theory seeks to balance corporate and human interests.
    B. His work is based on the premise that corporations are political as well as economic institutions.
    C. Communication theory can be used to diagnose distorted corporate decision making.
    D. Workplaces can be made more productive and democratic through communication reforms.

II.   Corporate colonization of everyday life.
    A. Deetz views multinational corporations as the dominant force in society.
    B. Corporate control has sharply diminished the quality of life for most citizens.
    C. Deetz scrutinizes the structure of the corporate world.
    D. His theory of communication is "critical" because he questions the primacy of corporate prosperity.

III. Information vs. communication: a difference that makes a difference.
    A. Deetz challenges Shannon and Weaver's theory that communication is the transmission of information, a view that perpetuates corporate dominance.
    B. All corporate communication is an outcome of political processes that are usually undemocratic and harmful to democracy.
    C. Deetz' communication model emphasizes language's role in shaping social reality.
        1. Language does not represent things that already exist; it produces what we believe to be "self-evident" or "natural."
        2. Corporations subtly produce meanings and values.
    D. Like Pearce and Cronen, Deetz considers communication to be the ongoing social construction of meaning, but he emphasizes that the issue of power runs through all language and communication.
    E. Managerial control often takes precedence over representation or long-term company health.
    F. Codetermination, on the other hand, epitomizes participatory democracy.
    G. Public decisions can be formed through strategy, consent, involvement, and participation.

IV.   Strategy—overt managerial moves to extend control.
    A. Managerialism is a discourse that values control above all else.
    B. Forms of control based in communication systems impede any real worker voice in structuring their work.

C. The desire for control can even exceed the desire for corporate performance.
D. The quest for control is evident in the corporate aversion to public conflict.
E. Strategic control does not benefit the corporation, and it alienates employees and causes rebellion.
F. Because of these drawbacks, most managers prefer to maintain control through voluntary consent.

V. Consent—willing allegiance to covert control.
A. Consent is the variety of situations and processes in which someone actively, though unknowingly, accomplishes the interests of others in the faulty attempt to fulfill his or her own interests.
B. Consent is developed through managerial control of elements of corporate culture: workplace language, information, forms, symbols, rituals, and stories.
C. The force of organizational practice is strongest when it is unrecognized or associated with common sense.

VI. Involvement—free expression of ideas, but no voice.
A. Meaningful democracy requires that people affected by decisions have forums for discussion and a voice in the final result.
1. Forums provide the opportunity for the free expression of ideas.
2. Voice means expressing interests that are freely and openly informed and having those interests represented in joint decisions.
B. Through open discussion, employees air their grievances, state their desires, and recommend improvements.
C. But free expression is not the same as having a "voice" in corporate decisions, and knowledge of this difference creates worker cynicism.

VII. Participation—stakeholder democracy in action.
A. Meaningful democratic participation creates better citizens and social choices while providing economic benefits.
B. Deetz advocates open negotiations of power.
C. There are six classes of stakeholders, each with unique needs.
1. Investors.
2. Workers.
3. Consumers.
4. Suppliers.
5. Host communities.
6. Greater society and the world community.
D. Some stakeholders have taken greater risks and made longer-term investments than have stockholders and top-level managers; Deetz believes these stakeholders should have a say in corporate decisions.
E. Managerialism impedes democratic stakeholder participation through the process of systematically distorting communication.
1. Systematically distorted communication operates without employees' overt awareness.
2. What can be openly discussed or even thought is restricted; only certain options are available.

F. Discursive closure suppresses potential conflict.
 1. People may be classified as disqualified to speak on certain issues.
 2. Arbitrary definitions may be labeled "natural."
 3. Values behind decisions may be kept hidden.
 4. Discussion of certain topics may be discouraged or discounted.
 G. Managers should mediate, rather than persuade, coordinating the conflicting interests of all parties.

VIII. AES Corp.—empowerment rooted in values.
 A. AES Corp. exemplifies Deetz' recommendations.
 B. The company has four basic principles.
 1. Fun.
 2. Social responsibility
 3. Integrity.
 4. Fairness.
 C. Deetz believes that critics are unreasonably hard on stakeholder democracy.

IX. Critique—is workplace democracy just a dream?
 A. Deetz' approach to corporate decision making is inherently attractive, yet there are some difficulties as well.
 B. Deetz' constructivist view of communication does not necessarily support his reform agenda.
 C. Deetz' campaign for stakeholder negotiation may not be realistic.
 D. Can we expect one theory to reform both commonsense conceptions of communication and private business simultaneously?

Key Names and Terms

Stanley Deetz
 University of Colorado communication professor and proponent of a critical theory of organizational communication.
Communication Model
 A critical approach to communication that regards language as the principal medium through which social reality is produced and reproduced.
Managerial Control
 Corporate decision processes that systematically exclude the voices of people who are affected by the decision.
Codetermination
 Corporate decision processes that invite open dialogue among all stakeholders.
Managerialism
 A discourse practice based on a systematic logic, a set of routine practices, and an ideology that privileges top-down control.
Strategy
 The overt practice of managerial control.
Consent
 The process by which an employee actively, though unknowingly, accomplishes the interests of management in the faulty attempt to fulfill his or her own interests.

Involvement
> Organizational stakeholders' free expression of ideas that may or may not affect managerial decisions.

Participation
> The process by which all stakeholders in an organization negotiate power and openly reach collaborative decisions.

Systematically Distorted Communication
> Operating without employees' overt awareness, this form of discourse restricts what can be openly expressed or even thought.

Discursive Closure
> Systematically distorted communication in which those with power suppress potential dissent.

Principal Changes

Previously Chapter 19, this material has been significantly revised. The global example of *Roger & Me* (which was not popular with Deetz) has been replaced by *Erin Brockovich*, and the Saturn case study has been replaced by a presentation of AES Corp. Griffin has clarified his discussion of the concept of "involvement, added Figure 20.2, and updated the *Second Look* section.

Suggestions for Discussion

One good way to begin your discussion of Deetz' critical theory of organizational communication is through comparisons to Pacanowsky's approach as featured in the previous chapter. Both theorists are intrigued by corporate culture; and, as Griffin notes, both study workplace language, information, forms, rituals, and stories. It's significant, however, that although the tradition from which Pacanowsky stems is wary of influencing the culture one studies, Deetz demonstrates a strong desire to apply codetermination to reform corporate culture. Pacanowsky is certainly mindful of economic issues, but Deetz keys on aspects of power and domination and highlights ways to increase authentic participation. (Integrative Essay Question #1, below, seeks to address these differing emphases.)

At the heart of Deetz' theory, it seems to me, is a paradox or tension that is important to communicate to your students. On the one hand, Deetz is a skeptic who attacks conventional manifestations of corporate power and "business as usual" in American business. On the other hand, he is an eternal optimist when it comes to the power of communication to bring about positive change in organizations and to enhance the roles of all stakeholders. This dichotomous stance can be traced directly to two significant influences on Deetz' work: Karl Marx, who is featured in Griffin's analysis of Hall in Chapter 26; and Jurgen Habermas, whom Griffin features in the *Ethical Reflections* following the mass communication unit. Marx's economic views are manifested in Deetz' pessimism about unrestrained capitalism, and Habermas's "ideal speech situation" shapes Deetz' idealistic goal of codetermination.

Students may have interesting reactions to Deetz' position. Those who see themselves as future captains of corporate America and who imagine experiencing all the benefits—but

none of the sacrifices and shortcomings—of the lifestyle of Lynn's father may resist Deetz' message by denying the unsavory aspects of worker consent. Those students whose parents may represent the organizational elite may resent Deetz' critical stance and his highly negative portrayal of managerialism. They may question his claim that "most corporate successes (or failures) are the results of factors beyond managerial control" (289). In addition, several of your students may echo Griffin's criticism that Deetz' faith in participation may be overly optimistic (297). Communication majors want to believe in the power of their discipline, yet nonetheless those with some experience in the corporate world may suggest that even the best intended communicative strategies may fail to bring together diverse parties with widely disparate interests. These issues should stimulate lively discussion. (Essay Question #2, below, may be a way of addressing some of these concerns.)

If you are in search of additional examples of the corporate practices of strategy and consent, I recommend investigating Frederick Taylor's *Principles of Scientific Management*. (See our treatment of the introduction to the Organizational Communication section, above.)

In the *Critique* section of this chapter, Griffin makes the provocative and controversial argument that Deetz' "advocacy of stakeholder rights and participatory democracy isn't necessarily furthered by his constructionist view of communication" (297), an argument that Deetz and others do not accept. This assertion, which is based on Deetz' antifoundationalist, postmodern approach to knowledge and discursive practice, may require unpacking for your students. Be sure they understand the apparent contradiction that comes when one claims that all truths are relative and that reality is socially constructed, then seeks to promote a particular truth about workers' rights. It's possible that one could raise a similar concern about a potential clash between CMM's overt social agenda and its postmodern, antifoundationalist foundation.

Sample Application Log

Laura

This theory was a bit difficult to apply to my life; I've never worked for a corporation (and I've made it somewhat of a goal never to either. But perhaps this is because I've come to view corporations as Deetz has, and also view them as needing change.)

My aunt has worked for AT&T most of her working life (she's *45)*. She moved rather high up the ladder and had a pretty good, high-ranking job. She was laid off a couple of months ago. As I understand it, AT&T has been gradually downsizing for a while now. For over a year, she has had no job security; she would go into work every day not knowing if this was to be the day she would "find out" that her job was no longer essential. In the meantime, much younger, inexperienced people have been promoted to new positions within her department, right before her very eyes. This just seems like a medieval king, or an evil dictatorship to me—not knowing whether the king is going to summon you in and call for your head on a platter. But you know he's a hungry king, so your end is probably coming pretty soon. How does one plan one's life with outlooks like that? I know it's made my aunt a less happy person. (Although she's more happy now that she has the prospect of teaching at a university instead. It's more her style anyway.)

So, how do these authoritarian companies command such loyalty? Corporate colonization of everyday life. They offer goodies. My aunt obviously got good telephone rates, as well as all the latest technologies AT&T had to offer. My grandpa worked for them all his life and has a nice pension or retirement account (whichever) now. I'm sure my aunt was looking forward to that (but those were the good old days). Everything having to do with phones in my life has always been AT&T, and since my uncle works for Sony, the same is the case—anything technological or mechanical (down to my audio tapes even), if Sony makes it, we have a Sony. It went without saying in my family.

This is not the case anymore, now that my family's eyes have been opened to what these corporations are capable of doing with one fell swoop. Maybe this disillusionment will be the case with greater society eventually, if corporate atrocities keep happening.

(I think it all started with our capitalistic form of economy . . .)

Exercises and Activities

One of Deetz' most thoughtful, provocative claims is that the force of organizational practice is strongest when it is unrecognized or associated with common sense (291). Encourage your students to test the veracity of this assertion with examples from their own lives. Aspects of your college or university's culture such as the importance placed on letter grades, the manner in which admission standards are determined, the use of graduate student TAs or teachers, the emphasis on winning athletic teams, the presence of Greek organizations, the hierarchy built into the professorate, guidelines for tenure, rules about parking, and the role of students in decision making may provide useful illustrations. Have them consider also whether or not forms of discursive closure lead to systematically distorted communication at your college or university. (Essay Questions #4 and #5, below, may address some of these concerns.)

We are quite taken by the cereal box discussion (Figure 20.2) and its potential for generating new exercises. Have students create their own alternative texts for the product boxes containing other foods, toys, cosmetics, birth control, and alcoholic beverages. Real estate fliers, college admission brochures, and automobile ads are also fair game.

When Em Griffin teaches this chapter, he shows the last fifteen minutes of so of *Roger & Me*. Although Deetz argues vehemently that the film unfairly stacks the deck against corporate America, it is a *tour de force*, nonetheless, that vividly drive home—if by hyperbole— the potential harm a corporation can do to less-powerful stakeholders. Griffin also makes a specific point of reiterating in class the key distinctions between information and communication (see Integrative Question #2, below), as well as the relationships between CMM and this critical approach (see Integrative Question #3, below). Finally, he notes that if students have little to say about the material presented in this chapter, an instructor may be able to open discussion of the issues by asking them talk about their parents' experiences in the working world. This practical suggestion may be just what they need to get their theoretical wheels turning.

Ed McDaniel asserts that contemporary events in the corporate world (e.g., Enron, Xerox, WorldCom, etc.) have provided a rich medium to help illustrate the negative aspect of Deetz's theory. He finds that the comic strip "Dilbert" also offers a source of comic illustration of corporate excesses, but, unfortunately, positive examples to support Deetz's theory are more rare.

McDaniel introduces his class to Eric Scholsser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001). He writes,

> I have enjoyed a degree of success by employing examples of common corporate practices, which support the basic assumptions of Deetz's critical theory of communication approach to organizations. To begin the class, I ask everyone who is or has worked in a fast food restaurant, or has a friend who is or has, to raise their hand. This will normally involve a significant number of the class. Then I produce a copy of Eric Scholsser's *Fast Food Nation*. Scholsser's recent work does for the contemporary fast food industry what Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* did for the Chicago meat packing industry at the beginning of the 20th Century.

He features material from pages 70-72. Here is a taste, so to speak:

> The strict regimentation at fast food restaurants creates standardized products. It increases the throughput. And it gives fast food companies an enormous amount of power over their employees. "When management determines exactly how every task is to be done... and can impose its own rules about pace, output, quality, and technique," the sociologist Robin Leidner has noted, "[it] makes workers increasingly interchangeable." The management no longer depends upon the talents or skills of its workers – those things are built into the operating system and machines. Jobs that have been "de-skilled" can be filed cheaply. The need to retain any individual worker is greatly reduced by the ease with which he or she can be replaced. (70)

He concludes this activity by asking students to provide examples of what lasting skills they think were gained from employment at a fast food enterprise.

To vivify the "Corporate Colonization" section of the chapter, McDaniel employs the following strategy:

> I show a graphic that depicts the salaries of CEO's of several companies (these figures are normally available in corporate annual reports, business magazines, the *Wall Street Journal*, etc.). This is followed by a graphic illustrating the disparity in annual growth of executive–worker compensation. These illustrations are a very effective way of maintaining students' attention, especially when you use companies (e.g., airlines) that are in some way associated with the student's lives (i.e., airfare for that Spring Break jaunt to Cancun).

A final challenge for your students. Relatively early in the chapter, Griffin states that "a majority of human communication scholars now dismiss Shannon and Weaver's information

theory" (286). Ask students why, if this is true, did Griffin include a discussion of this theory in Chapter 2? This ought to set their wheels turning.

Further Resources

To give yourself a better sense of the source of Deetz' optimism about group deliberation, skip ahead to the *Ethical Reflection* featuring Habermas. Deetz fans may enjoy his 1997 International Communication Association Presidential Address, published as "Communication in the Age of Negotiation," *Journal of Communication* 47 (Autumn 1997): 118-35.

SAMPLE EXAM QUESTIONS are not included in online version of Instructor's Manual