Applied Organizational Communication: Principles and Pragmatics for Future Practice (2nd Ed.)

Harris, Thomas E.
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Considering the swift pace of modern technological advancement and its influence on human behavior, how do communicators maximize their "success" within organizational contexts? Thomas E. Harris, in *Applied Organizational Communication: Principles and Pragmatics for Future Practice, 2nd ed.*, earnestly addresses this question by describing organizational communication as a diverse cultural process that is subject to change. He offers what appears to be an upper level undergraduate textbook that is wide-ranging, concrete, and--at times--exhausting.

Harris, like many organizational communication authors, vigorously (and effectively) sells communication as an efficacious topic of study. It is a "tool" with which individuals--if "effective"--can maximize their organizational experience (and careers). He argues that communication is important to the organization, its leaders, and the individual--a brief three-part idea that unfortunately goes away (at least as an explicit organizational device) after the first chapter. Relying on lived consultant experience, he adopts a process based, transactional mode of exploring organizational communication--reminiscent of contemporary models of exploring interpersonal communication (see Stewart, 1999; Wood, 1999) and cultural communication (see below). In doing so, Harris suggests that communication within organizations is highly complex, symbolic (and, thus, meaningful), and subject to flux endemic to modern organizations and society.

Harris cogently argues that "the more we become aware of the ineffective uses of communication in organizations, the more the concept seems to be all-inclusive and difficult to study" (p. 15). Indeed, through the study of a particular communication topic or context emerges numerous other puzzling phenomena worthy of attention--many that we can never give fair attention. Thus, our research questions and their answers are always incomplete. By discussing this vastness of communication study early in the text, Harris sets the tone for an understanding of organizational behavior, and communication in general, as something that is inherently uncertain. Communication, and the numerous interpersonal phenomena that he presents in detail (e.g., perception, verbal and nonverbal "communication," listening, and conflict management), serve as "tools" through which communicators make social interaction more certain--much like how the bottom row of high school student bodies helps make a wondrous pyramid formation more solid and secure. Accompanying his discussion of these phenomena are related discussions of organization and change, management and organizational theories, networks and channels, interpersonal and small group communication, leadership, and new technology.

Organizations are not only complex, dynamic, and open systems, but also cultural resources. Harris offers a

timely reminder that "culture" is not only something to which communicators claim "membership" (e.g., "I am a member of an academic culture."), but rather something that they *do* or *perform* (e.g., "I 'do' culture by interacting with fellow organizational members in various ways."). Individuals constitute organizational culture via communication. This social constructionist perspective suggests culture to be an evolving phenomenon subject to communicators' diversity (race and ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, social economic class, etc.). Thus, diverse people constitute diverse organizational cultures.

Harris wisely mentions Dwight Conquergood (1991). Yet, there are additional (just as useful) examples of cultural communication research. For example, Dell Hymes (1972), Gerald Philipsen (1992), Donal Carbaugh (1996), Tamar Katriel (1986), and H.L. Goodall (1989, in addition to his other numerous imaginative works), offer non-organizational communication exemplars for social constructionist views of culture that would complement and strengthen Harris' treatment of the topic. [1] They also offer methodological discussions about *how* to study organizational culture--an important topic for almost any applied communication student that Harris does not emphasize. Additional valuable discussions about qualitative research methods (including ethnography, to which Harris briefly draws our attention) can be found online: Qualitative Research Internet Resources; Qualitative Methods Workbook; and Critical/Qualitative Methods Resource Page.

Harris's overall goal is to offer a "comprehensive, clear, interesting, current, and accessible" text (p. xx). At times, the exceptional amount of intellectual material becomes difficult to ingest and process fairly. Moreover, less evident (and likely needed) is a more explicit, circumspectful analysis that analyzes the complications of joining such a diverse group of theorists, and their potentially disparate arguments. For example, on which should we place more emphasis: *descriptive* accounts of diverse organizational communicators' distinct (i.e., local) performances, or traditional modernist perspectives (e.g., those concerning "problem solving" or "group cohesion") that *explain* (through tighter-feeling, often less diverse generalities) how "typical" organizational communication happens? Perhaps the broad range of material and limited page space prohibited a detailed circumspection of such a tension. By and large, however, Harris accomplishes what he sets out to do. Students, scholars, and practitioners can tap into his resourceful text to begin their immersion into the realm of organizational communication study.

Works Cited

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Endnotes

[1] These scholars are not united in theoretical assumptions. They do adopt similar social constructionist paradigms of culture. Page space prohibits a just explanation of their relationship.