

## Action and Agency

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### Abstract

The relationship between communication and action and agency is discussed. Crucial themes pertaining to action are presented in their intersection with communication. The question of intentionality is contrasted with the pragmatic view of communication. The role communication plays in providing alternate descriptions of action is also discussed, as well as the importance of communication in the individuation of action, i.e. in bringing together the many elements that constitute a single action. The entry then discusses the shared character of action, as well as the action of collectives, including organizations, for which conventional models of action struggle to account. The conventional opposition between “real” action and less than real communication is also discussed.

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## ACTION AND AGENCY

Writing on the notions of action and agency necessarily brings to mind a plethora of neighboring concepts, including praxis, practice, activity or event. Attempting to cover all of them would make this entry a general course in the history of philosophy and sociology, which, obviously, it is not. It could be argued that the whole of social sciences is concerned with action. For example, praxis would bring us back to the origins of Western philosophy and to Aristotle's distinction between *theoria* (contemplation of truth), *poiesis* (the worker's production) and *praxis*, which was reserved to the free man. Like Karl Marx, American philosopher Hannah Arendt understands praxis as the translation of philosophy into action. The notion of practice, for its part, would require revisiting French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu work on the notion, but also that of many of his disciples, including Luc Boltanski or organization theorist Michel Crozier, in addition to examining the whole "practice turn" in contemporary social sciences, as discussed for instance by influential researchers including Martha Feldman, Wanda Olikowski or Dalvir Samra-Fredericks. The concept of activity as deep roots in developmental psychology, in particular in the works of Russian psychologist Alexei Leontiev, today, the writings of Finnish scholar Yrjö Engeström. The concept of event, for its part, would require a commentary on the works of philosophers Michel Foucault (with the idea of "eventualization"), Gilles Deleuze or Jacques Derrida. The limited space that is available here, but also clarity of argument, require that this discussion be kept at a relatively general level, where different meanings of the notion of "action" are used more or less interchangeably.

Furthermore, the notion of action, while usually understood as referring to human action, is also used to discuss collective action – which has addressed prominently by Nobel prize winner Elinor Ostrom –, organizational action (see King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010), or the action of material entities, which in the field of communication is being studied, for example, by François Cooren, Boris Brummans and other colleagues at the Université de Montréal, in Canada.

### INTENTIONALITY AND TRUE ACTION

That being said, when the term "action" is used in conjunction with "agency," it is usually in a specific usage, that of philosophy of action, which focus on the deeds of human *within* social contexts. Philosophical texts offering to explore the theme of action and agency are not scarce. Many of them are concerned with the discovery of criteria to define "true"

action as opposed, for example, to involuntary bodily behaviors or to unintended consequences. The debate concerns, for instance, the distinction between “the things that merely *happen* to people – the events they undergo – and the various things they genuinely *do*” (Wilson & Shpall, 2012, not paginated). One criterion for genuine action would consist in intentionality. For instance, British philosopher G. E. M. Anscombe suggests that the agent must be aware of her own action, without this awareness being an external self-observation, and she must experience her action as something she controls (as reported in Grünbaum, 2010). American philosopher of language John Searle also considers intentionality as crucial to action and, in particular, to meaning, as understanding consists in a reconstruction of the intention (a similar argument is made by his fellow philosopher Paul Grice). Whether intention is central to action and its meaning – and whether there is any need for a distinction between “real” action and other forms of events – is in part challenged when the focus is moved away from the originator of action to its receivers or observers. Many European philosophers, including Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Umberto Eco, and Jacques Derrida, among others, argued for a focus on the reception of action, rather than on its initiation and intention – for, after all, the author may very well be “dead.”

The view of action as being tied to intentionality restricts the notion of action to human beings. It limits the ability to account for, say, organizational action or that of other collectives, unless it is supposed that these may have a form of consciousness and self-awareness. Furthermore, perhaps because of the legacy of structural linguistics, which distinguishes between language as a system of meanings (*langue*) and language as a situated performance (*parole*), action is seen as distinct from other elements that would constitute its context or the structure where it takes place (Ahearn, 2001). The identification of genuine action, therefore, also consists in a “work of purification” – a term dear to French sociologist Bruno Latour – in order to isolate a true, intentional and human action, from what would merely be its context, setting, pre-conditions or unforeseen consequences.

An alternate view of action takes the form of pragmatism, which focuses on the *effects* of actions rather than on its initiation. With pragmatism, the issue of intentionality takes but a secondary role, as an action may have various consequences independently of whether they were intended or not. The pragmatist view also allow recognizing expanding

agency to non-humans, as objects, structures or principles, for example, may *do* things that impact the world, irrespective of whether they “want” or not to perform those things. The extension of agency to non-humans has regularly been derided by authors who, misunderstanding the argument, believed that it necessarily implied an extension of intentionality. A pragmatist stance also allows not presuming of the kind of actions that are worthy of observation: even the most banal action may turn out to have important consequences. Communication scholars are mostly familiar with pragmatism under the guise of John L. Austin’s speech act theory, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea that meaning lies in the actual use of words, or George Herbert Mead’s interactionism. For example, Derrida, in suggesting that a text always escapes the intention of its author, borrows from Austin. There is in addition a growing interest in the field of communication for the works of C. S. Pierce, William James or John Dewey and, more generally, what has come to be known as American Pragmatism (see the excellent review in Misak, 2013).

#### THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION

Communication, in most discussions of action and agency, may play at least three distinct roles. First, it may concern the decision to act, i.e. it consists in more or less rational, ethical dialogue over the choice of a course of action, as exemplified by Jürgen Habermas and the communication ethics tradition (which is represented in the field of communication, for example, by Ronald C. Arnett and Pat Arnesson). In viewing communication as leading to specific sequences of action, it is understood as being pragmatic, i.e. it is not only concerned with describing pre-existing facts, but also as bringing into existing new states of the world. In particular, a communicational approach to the decision to act has highlighted the limits of theories that view agents as solely seeking to maximize benefit and the world as being “out there” and available to the analysis of agents. Dennis Mumby and Linda Putnam’s (2000) critique of Herbert Simon’s notion of bounded rationality – which views emotions as peripheral to decision-making – is an example of the contribution communication can make to the study of the ways decisions to act are made. Collective management of natural resources is another a field that has witnessed a shift from rational-agent models – which is the approach used, for example, by Elinor Ostrom – to deliberative and dialogical approaches (see e.g. Cleaver, 2007). Studies that focus on dialogue and rational conversation may be contrasted with the so-called practice approaches, whether in the tradition of Bourdieu or, for instance, in the tradition of Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, whose attention focuses on action as it is being committed

and for which the meaning of action is not negotiated in advance but rather discovered through its very performance or “enaction” – a term that organizational psychologist Karl E. Weick uses to describe the very active dimension of sensemaking. Furthermore, if as public administration researcher Charles Lindblom famously remarked, action – and in particular collective action – ends up consisting in “muddling through,” then the conversation that leads to the decision to act, no matter how rational, loses much of its luster. Still in the field of public administration, Jeffrey Pressman and Aaron Wildavsky also remarked, in discussing the many failures of public policy, that divorcing decision from implementation misses the many, continuous renegotiations of action that take place at all stages.

Communication may also be viewed, in a critical perspective, either as what permits the obfuscation of human beings’ ability to act, or as what helps reveal this obfuscation. In particular, media industries may distort the dialogical practices required for collective decision-making at the societal level. The works of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and other Frankfurt School philosophers consist, in that sense, in the denunciation of the standardisation of communication by cultural industries, leading to a form of collapse of reason (for a review, see Morris, 2001). The work of Robert McChesney (1996) illustrates this kind of critical work in communication studies. The field of organizational communication, for its part, abounds in critiques of official versions of organizational culture, of storytelling and narratives as social control mechanisms or of discourse as a device for the management of selves. The role of critical perspectives is regularly understood as giving back to the individual human agent his or her agency, which is confiscated by the system, structure or ideology within which he or she acts. However, as Jacques Derrida discusses in opposing the views of Max Stirner to those of Karl Marx, it may not be clear whether it is possible to reach a core of true, unmediated and uncontaminated agency, once all the “supplements” of agency are removed. In other words – as we will discuss below – it is possible that human beings may only act at the condition of being entangled in societies, organizations, networks and other collectives that both constrain and enable their agency. This argument may be likened to Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan’s discussion of technology both as extending a human being’s senses and, at the same time, as amputating the body’s organs for those senses: the very things that allow us to act also prevent us from doing so at other times.

Another role communication may play is more technical, but is equally crucial: it consists in the descriptions that are made of action. As the famous anthropologist Clifford Geertz points out, the difference between the blinking of an eye and a complicit wink lies not so much in the intrinsic properties of the deed, but also in the culturally-mediated descriptions that may be made of it. Some descriptions (winking rather than blinking) invest the action with intentionality. The American literary theorist Kenneth Burke, among others, theorized the way action is described and attributed motives following five aspects: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Descriptions also delimit the action under scrutiny within a sequence of events, such as G. E. M. Anscombe's classical example of the flicking of a light switch, which causes the room to be illuminated, and a robber to be scared off (as discussed in Wilson & Shpall, 2012). This is not only a matter of "punctuation" – as British philosopher Gregory Bateson would call it – and of deciding the causal order of the events: it is also a matter of attributing or denying authorship to various individuals and things that are at play. Cooren (2004), for example, in discussing the case of a note, remarks that while it may be said that a person *reminds herself* of something with a note, it is equally accurate to describe the situation as the note *reminding* her that she need to do something. In the first case, the agency of the person is prioritized, while in the second it is that of the note. Communication as a description of actions, then, plays an important part in distributing agency among the many people and things that make a difference in any given event (Castor & Cooren, 2006).

#### ALTERNATE DESCRIPTIONS OF ACTION

This last role of communication – describing action – casts intentionality and the search for "genuine" action in a new light. Indeed, whether or not an action is intentional and whether or not it is genuine become *empirical* matters, that may be observed through the way people, in conversation, account for the actions that take place. While the philosopher may also make descriptions of action – this is particularly the fact in the analytical tradition where propositions serve to analyse action – they must be acknowledged as existing concurrently to many other possible descriptions.

Alternate ways of describing action are not merely different and interchangeable versions of a same story. The crucial character of accounting practices – a central concept in ethnomethodology – is better understood when communication is recognized, in a pragmatic light, as *doing* things. This is true of speech acts such as declarations or

commands, as John Austin or John Searle remarked, but more profoundly, as is stressed by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, or by famous queer theory proponent Judith Butler, language constitutes our identities and the social order that binds us. For example, Vincent Descombes (1991, p. 35), commenting on French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic of action and his concept of narrative identity, suggests that the self is constituted as one narratively performs a "distinction between actions that I recognize as mine and those that I disavow..." and a "distribution on either side of the border that separates the self and the foreign all human matters: deeds and accomplishments, feelings, trials, titles to honor and to shame, rights, claims, duties, merit, etc." Communication and descriptions of action, in this sense, do not only *refer* to action, but *constitute* it, distribute or deny agency, and bind together events into broader, sensible units of action. It is also through communication that conceptions of agency are negotiated and shared, and become features of given cultures (Ahearn, 1999).

#### INDIVIDUATION OF ACTION

Viewed this way, communication may be said to be crucial to what Wilson and Shpall (2012) call the "individuation of action." The notion of individuation became popular thanks to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century writings of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon, who had an important influence, including on Gilles Deleuze. Instead of seeing action as a deed that happens and that is, then, described, it may be more profitable to understand action as something that needs to be continually brought into existence. This is true, firstly, because committing a deed is an effort that requires the combined sweat of many different entities, rather than merely the will of a conscious human. This is suggested, among others, by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon's Actor-Network theory, which also draws on Simondon. The philosophical hesitation over the very definition of action is a testimony to the convoluted character of any action. Secondly, the continuous individuation of action may be connected to the fact that identification of a single action, with an author, a cause, a sequence of deeds, consequences, and so forth, is matter of debate and decision (Castor & Cooren, 2006). Any attempt to distribute blame or praise is a decision over the authorship of action. Agency, then, is not the privilege of individual people, but always concerns configurations of people, things, events, etc., that rely on communication.

In addition to the roles that are listed above, communication also contributes to the individuation process, in two analytically distinct but empirically related ways. The first is

that it is through communication that entities join forces and coalesce in the accomplishment of an action. Callon (1986) suggests that this joint action is accomplished through four steps: problematization, interessement, enrolment and mobilization. In other words, for any action to happen, a problem must be defined in such a way that different entities become involved in roles that can be successfully combined, and that the linkages that are so created can be spoken of through a single voice. Latour (1996, p. 237) summarizes the joint character of any action in the formula: “To do is to make happen. When one acts, others proceed to action.” Communication makes possible the work of alignment and translation necessary for this to be possible.

The second, related way in which communication partakes in the individuation process is in contributing to the after-the-fact revision of the linkages that are so established. Indeed, any assemblage is but provisional: a problem can be redefined, participants may lose interest and get disbanded, and spokespeople can be contradicted and repudiated. The individuation process is continuous and groupings must be performed again and again, for any unitary action to be describable and, indeed, possible. This means that action is always remains controversial, even after its initiation. In particular, for an action to have social import, it must be carried around, through time and space (see e.g. Vasquez, 2013). This is crucial for collectives to exist, according to Giddens (1984, p. 17):

Structure thus refers, in social analysis, to the structuring properties allowing the “binding” of time-space in social systems, the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them “systemic” form.

This means that actions that were performed there and then must somehow be made pragmatically relevant here and there for them to keep existing as actions. For instance, while the judge’s declaration that “you are now husband and wife” is what turns a couple into a married couple, the continued effect of the declaration on this marriage rests on a network of legal documents, photos and videos from the wedding day, rings, and memories. It is thanks to that network that the couple is married not only as long as the judge is nearby, but also years later and far from the courthouse where the wedding took place. This means that the various elements that hold the marriage together must regularly be mobilized and brought together to re-present, here and now, the fact that there and then, the judge declared that they were married. This constantly renewed discursive performance



may also fail. What seemed like an obvious linkage between elements may appear harder to achieve, either because a document is missing, because memories are fading, or because the couple does not feel the same interest in reminding that they were and still are married.

### THE SHARED CHARACTER OF ACTION

Considering that action is a collective achievement also allows revisiting the micro/macro or agent/structure divide. It becomes possible to say that it is *both* the agent *and* the structure (whatever that may be) that are active in any given situation. Prioritizing either element is a matter of description rather than an intrinsic feature of agency. The issue becomes empirical: how do people distribute agency between human participants and structural elements? Among others, in the field of communication, François Cooren tackles this question by suggesting to think of agency through the lens of ventriloquism: by viewed activity and passivity as *effects*, Cooren shows that participants present themselves as moved by principles, rules, organizations, attitudes, values and other elements, to which, in turn, they provide a voice and the ability to act in the current situation. It is exactly because the “real” source of action is an *undecidable* matter that action is possible at all.

Cooren calls the entities that participants invoke in their talk *figures*. The word, in addition to fitting with the metaphor of ventriloquism, avoids the loaded history of the other words he could have chosen, such as passions or reasons. Interestingly, Grünbaum (2010, p. 337) considers that “an intentional action is an action an agent is performing because she has some reason to do so.” For Cooren, it could very well be said that when someone is acting for a reason, then it is the action that is acting through him and her and that, therefore, it is not the truly – or at least not only – the person who is acting. This is also what Derrida, on whom Cooren draws, stresses when discussing friendship or duty: one cannot claim to love *for some reason*, for then he does not love the friend, but rather the reason; one cannot admit acting out of duty, because then he would not be acting dutifully. Derrida suggests that this is where secrecy plays a part: it is only by not disclosing the reasons of action that agency can be reclaimed. Arguably, however, in most cases there is no problem for anyone in recognizing that agency is shared and that when one act on behalf of some figure, one is also acting by oneself.

The shared character of action has been studied through the narratology of Lithuanian-born French semiotician A. J. Greimas. His approach is not limited to the study of narratives as such, but allows studying action *narratively*. For example, Daniel Robichaud

(2003) looks at the ways stories told at a city hall meeting are imbricated into each other to constitute collective action. Narratology, thus, consists in the study of the way communicative and, specifically, discursive performances weave together singular events into sensible units of action, complete with a subject, an object, and an effort from the first to recover the second. Greimas' model is of particular importance because it recognizes that action is a case of "participative communication," meaning that when one shares one's action with another, one does not lose it for that much. For instance, when someone claims to be acting on behalf of someone else, it does not mean for that much that the first person has not also accomplished the deed: action can have multiple authors at once, who can circulate it among them without any one of them losing authorship for that much (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011).

#### THE ACTION OF COLLECTIVES

The fact that authorship of action can be shared between several authors at once is crucial in extending the notion of action to collectives and organizations and, more generally, in allowing a discussion on agency. Communication, here again, plays a crucial role. A first way of understanding the action of collectives is in considering it as a coordination of the actions of the human individuals who populate the said collective. This may be paralleled, for instance, with Weber's notion of "social behavior," which he defines as "related by the individuals involved to the conduct of others and is oriented accordingly" (Weber, 1969, p. 29). The role of communication, in this first variant of collective action, is to ensure that a collection of individuals work together to reach a goal that brings them together. Another way of understanding collective action is to ask whether the collective itself may be an actor in its own right and at its own level, without reducing it to the action of the individuals that populate it. For instance, King, Felin and Whetten (2010) propose different views of the way an organization may be considered as a social actor. A common opposition to the view that organizations are actors in their own right is to consider this as a fiction – in particular in a critical perspective that would decry the stories and other discursive devices by which people are usurped their agency – or an "attribution error" (as some psychologists would call it), i.e. people mistakenly believe that social entities are acting and fail to identify the actual human actors. For social psychologist Karl Weick, this is an *ontological oscillation* that is of little use when accounting for action, as it may be at once true that people act on behalf of their organization and that the organization is acting. For

communication scholars, the fascinating question is not whether either position is truer than the other, but rather how the passage from one to the other is achieved.

One perspective that offers to show how people may act on behalf of organizations is the principal-agent model, which is at the basis of what has been called firm theory. In this model, a principal – the organization, its managers or shareholders – delegates a certain number of actions to an agent who acts in its behalf. The problem, for firm theory, is to ensure that the delegated task gets performed according to the principal's expectations. Solutions include, among others, a more or less enforceable contract or the provision of incentives. Communication, in a principal-agent model, is one of the ways by which a principal may clarify its expectations to the agent and, conversely, a means for the agent to report its activities back to the principal. Some writing has also been devoted to the initial negotiation of the contract, prior to the agent's engagement. The principal-agent approach is criticized, among other, by communication scholar Timothy Kuhn.

The principal-agent model is criticized for putting too much emphasis on the contractual relation and for presuming the very organizational action that it claims to elucidate. In other words, it does not take into account the actual communication practices that constitute the relation between the organization and the humans who act on its behalf, and that allow the organization to act. An alternative is provided by an approach to organizational communication called Communicative Constitution of Communication (see Putnam & Nicotera, 2009), or CCO, which accents the contribution of communication to the very make-up and endurance of collectives. In the CCO tradition, and in particular in the work of François Cooren, organizations may act because they are *presentified*, i.e. invoked or mobilized, in the current context, where they can then make a difference. Communication is then the means through which this summoned and made to act in the situation. The question of authority or authorship is crucial in understanding this relation. As prominent organizational communication scholar James R. Taylor explains, people invoke the organization as acting with them – i.e. they share actions with it – because it lends them authority and, indeed, allows them to act and be author of their own actions. It therefore in and through communication that organizations can act.

If it is recognized that organizations may act at their own level, including to enable the action of people, then the question of intentionality loses its value. Communication scholars concerned with collective action are more interested in providing useful accounts

of that action and of the way it is concretely performed, than with identifying some “genuine” action. Whether intention is involved or not, or whether people distinguish between different types of action, are then empirical matters instead of philosophical pre-definitions of the concept of action. In that sense, the study of collective action is mainly pragmatic.

### THE REALITY OF ACTION

Discussing of the intersection between communication and action raises an important question: that of the reality of the action being scrutinized. If, for example, we suppose that action is subject to several alternate definitions, then one possible accusation is that we fall prey to a form of relativism where possibly wrong descriptions of action are put on the same footing as the actual action. Not only could those descriptions be unfortunate mistakes, but an additional risk is that they may serve to further political agendas and serve to deceive people on their agency, giving them an illusory impression of freedom. For example, when suggesting that communication constitutes organizations, then perhaps researchers are also misleading people into thinking that they have some influence on the structures where they work. Another danger of communicational perspectives on action would be to provide the false impression that discussing action amounts in itself to an independence from the real, material constraints that limit people’s agency. In other words, instead of actually freeing people from their chains, we are merely finding nicer names for them.

This debate could be said to be a symptom of a more conventional one: the debate over the reality of language. When, for example, Gilles Deleuze, in his interview with Claire Parnet, vehemently criticizes Wittgenstein’s philosophy, it is because the French philosopher has in mind an acute separation between reality and language. In focusing on language, Wittgensteinians would have lost sight of reality itself – or corporeality – and merely attended to its descriptions, taking the sign for the thing. Deleuze probably has in mind the early Wittgenstein and, more generally, analytical philosophy – say, Gottlob Frege or Bertrand Russel. This trend of philosophy could be broadly (and somewhat unfairly) described, for our purpose, as believing that the meaning of propositions (i.e. descriptions of the world) could be logically discovered and that it would teach us something about the world as such. A proposition such as “the cat is on the mat” could be broken down and analysed, until something could be learned about the possibility of some cat finding itself on

some mat. Wittgenstein, however, changed his tune and suggested in his later work (including his *Philosophical Investigations*) a completely revised version of his philosophy. Rather than supposing that language reflects reality, he proposed that language takes on its meaning through the way it is used in actual contexts. Another way of saying this is that *words mean what they do*. “The cat is on the mat” may be used as an example, in which case it does not actually refer to any cat sitting on any mat: instead, it calls the reader to imagine some typical proposition used in analytical philosophy; it means “any banal sentence that philosophers use.” It is its use (in this paper) that provides it with meaning, and not some relation to existing outside situations, with which it would have been mistaken.

The sentence, then, is not some kind of layer of description added on top of a substrate of reality. The sentence *does* something in its own right (it provides the reader with an example). As American pragmatist William James put it, “any idea upon which we can ride” has an element of reality. Language, inasmuch as it does things and has effects, therefore, is part of reality, rather than being opposed to it. More importantly, the *effects* of language occupy a level of reality that is not of a different order than other kinds of effects. Once again, Deleuze and Guattari, in “Postulates of Linguistics,” a chapter from *A Thousand Plateaus*, distinguish between actual “corporeal” effects and linguistic “incorporeal” ones. The authors give the example of a judge declaring a convict guilty. They oppose the reality of the subsequent imprisonment with the incorporeal effect of the alleged “guilt” of the culprit. This, of course, corresponds to a specific way of delimiting the action of the (linguistic) verdict: Austin’s speech act theory could very be used to argue that the *perlocutory* action of the verdict is the imprisonment, and that, therefore, the words of the judge have very concrete and bodily effects.

Communication’s ability to link together different aspects of reality – such as a body and a jail, or different components of organizations – is therefore not only a fiction, i.e. a truth that would only be valid within a linguistic realm that would be distinct from “the real world.” We could even go as far as to suggest that fictional characters, such as the Jack the Ripper or Mickey Mouse, in different ways, have effects beyond the pages of their respective stories. If what defines reality is the effect or the contribution to the world, then Jack the Ripper, by having kept many young people awake well past their bedtime, has acted in a way at least as real as caffeine may act on bodies. While a discussion on Jack the Ripper may seem trivial, the importance of recognizing the reality of communication’s contribution to

action becomes all the more sensitive when we think of whether BP is “responsible” for the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, or whether the European Union is responding appropriately to Russia’s incorporation of Crimea. Indeed, in those cases, it would very well be possible to claim that BP, the European Union, Russia or Crimea are merely fictitious beings and that our accounts of those actions fall in the trap of reifying them. What matters, after all, is the reality of the flesh-and-blood people being affected by those situations. However, common sense and literature alike are willing to recognize that organizational or systematic constraints and configurations have real consequences; that it is not necessarily any single individual at BP, but the way the organization is structured, or “the spirit of capitalism” that led to the oil spill. Similarly, while some people would like to blame specific Russian officials for the annexing of Crimea, or specific European leaders for their inaction, it could also be said that there are very real historical, economic and social configurations that make this situation possible. If people are being affected by these situations, then it is also an acknowledgement that the “situation” does things that are real enough to affect them. The ability of those situations to act relies on communication.

Communication scholars, in recognizing that nations, principles, fictions and other seeming immaterial entities may be *really* active in given situations, provide a powerful tool for the study of the ways in which human action is shared – for better or for worse – with elements that may constrain or enable it. Swedish authors Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman point out that it is possible to distinguish between two trends in the study of the relationship between language and the constraints on agency: “big D” Discourse and “small d” discourse. One “big D” side, Foucault’s insistence on the way power lies in a network of related discourses that constitute the knowledge of what is appropriate and speakable at this point in time, is one theory from which communication scholars draw to illustrate the role language plays in the limitation of agency. Many critical scholars, for example in studying gender issues in the workplace, attempt to reconstruct the web of discourses that provide a specific role at work to women or other minority people and that pass as natural and commonsensical knowledge. On the small d side, scholars who study interactions, either from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, with the works of Erving Goffman or Geroge Herbert Mead in mind, or that of Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, are concerned with the way language contributes to the emergence of a social order that becomes binding for the people involved. One oft-cited example is D. Lawrence Wieder’s study of the “convict code,” where the author shows how inmates at a transition house

discursively create and maintain a set of rules that is distinct from the house's "official" ones. While they are active in interactionally elaborating them, they also feel *really* bound by them – it is not because something is created that it is any less real. Communication scholars also have a unique potential to bridge the gap between small d and big D, or micro and macro – or, in fact, they can help show that the gap is regularly ignored in the way people actually talk and behave. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz provides valuable examples of the way something as "macro" as culture is made up of a web of shared meanings and that ethnography provides a look into the concrete actions through which people constitute and maintain those meanings. Communication, then, is also the way that we create the structures in which we sometimes feel trapped – but also allows us to escape from them.

#### SEE ALSO

Actor-Network Theory; Structure; Cause and Effect; Culture; Performance;  
Pragmatism; Speech acts

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