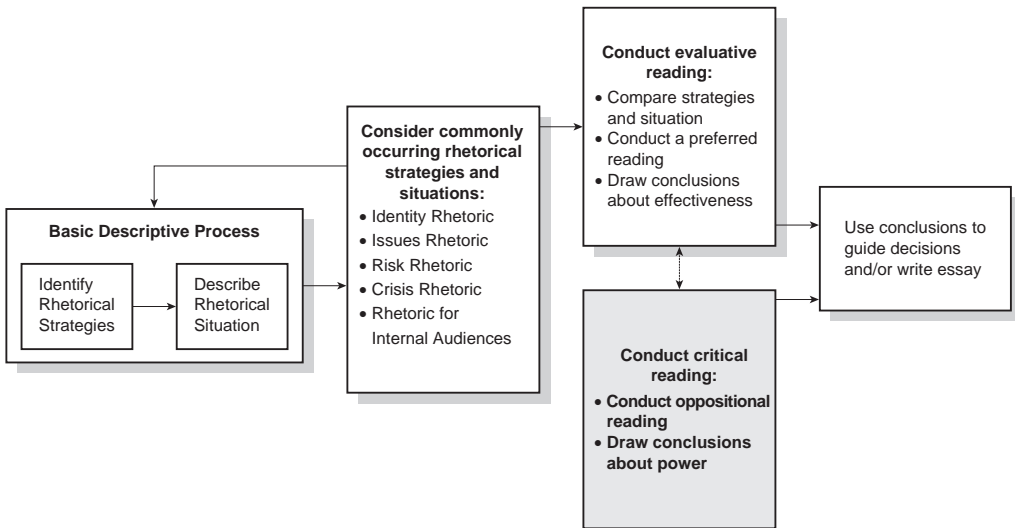


4

Critical Approaches to Organizational Rhetoric



Figure 4.1 Process for Analyzing Organizational Rhetoric (Critical)



SOURCE: Adapted from Ford (1999).

The corporate voice, not surprisingly, is the loudest in the land.

—Schiller, 1989, p. 4

It might well be argued that nothing at once fair, coherent, and brief can be written on this topic.

—Alvesson & Deetz, 2003, p. 191

In Chapters 1 through 3, we have focused upon analyzing organizational rhetoric from an evaluative perspective: a set of key questions for gaining an understanding of the language choices used by an organization in a particular artifact. In contrast, a second key approach to gaining an understanding of an organization's rhetorical choices is the critical approach. Up to this point, the word *critical* has been used primarily in the sense of *critique*. Now we add a second sense of the term: Critical approaches to organizational rhetoric center on questions of power and resistance to power. The answers to the questions of power and resistance help us analyze whether an organization is acting fairly and ethically, with a particular focus upon the organization's choices about *voice* and *choice* as they are demonstrated in its messages.

The quotations above help us on the path toward understanding critical approaches to organizational rhetoric. First, we need tools to help us critique the loudest voices in the land because organizations influence so many aspects of our lives, and second, the perspectives that emerge from critical theory are some of the most difficult for understanding the study of communication processes. However, the tentative answers to the questions posed by critical approaches to organizational rhetoric have important consequences in our lives.

The central questions in the critical approach to understanding human behavior in organizations focus on power. The concept of power and that of its close companion, control, have generated extensive study in philosophy and social science fields for centuries. Power and control's related companion, resistance, has been studied more specifically since the mid-20th century. Useful for this chapter is Conrad and Poole's (2005) discussion of power because of its succinct connections among power, control, and resistance: "Power is in the eye of the beholder. . . . Power is not possessed by a person. It is granted to that person by others" (p. 257). What is contested when we study organizational rhetoric is the organization's right to control some type of resource (e.g., money, time, service or product, ability to promote a position, and so forth) to the extent we can judge from its messages.

Clearly there is a wide range in a person's ability to grant power to another. If someone holds a gun to your head, you are likely to rather easily grant power to the person who threatens you. However, you have a wider range of choice in whether to grant power to a large oil company based upon its argument that huge profits are appropriate in a recession because that company invests those revenues in large-scale research projects. You also have a wider range of choice when you decide whether to support a nonprofit organization based upon its use of funds raised. In other words, you are more likely to feel that you can resist or accept the oil company's or the nonprofit's arguments. For example, you could withhold contributions based on the nonprofit organization's arguments, or you could buy gas from another oil company.

Thus, the questions that are the primary focus for critical theorists include the following: Who has power and in what circumstances? Who are the less powerful? How did these power relationships emerge in such a way, and why and how do these relationships continue in the way(s) that they do? What are the consequences for the humans involved? These are the questions most often asked by critical philosophers, critical sociologists, and critical anthropologists.

From a communication perspective, or the perspective that features messages of various kinds, the questions become the following: Who has the right or uses the right to speak in decisions? When an organizational representative speaks, who is responsible (Meisenbach & McMillan, 2006, p. 101)? Whose voices are left out of the decisions described in this book—those decisions that affect the organization, its members, and the communities of which the organization is a part? How do organizational voices interact to maintain the status quo in society and organizations? What rhetorical strategies do those in power (i.e., organizations) use to influence the likelihood of their desired outcomes? What are the consequences of what is said and by whom for the department, organization, and communities of which the organization and its members are a part? The critical approach to organizational rhetoric helps us critique wide-ranging problems; below are two examples.

First, the rights of workers, particularly in manufacturing settings, continue to be an ongoing issue between unions and corporations. For example, in 1994, workers at Staley Corporation unsuccessfully tried to protest rotating 12-hour shifts, gain increased salaries and education

benefits, and gain lifelong health insurance benefits. In her critical rhetorical analysis, Cloud (2005) described the rhetorical strategies used by the workers to try to force Staley's management to act upon their demands, as ranging from a warrior stance (i.e., going on the offensive) to ultimately a victim stance (i.e., suffering attacks). She concluded that their rhetorical strategies were ineffective without "material strategies"—i.e., the ability to shut down Staley's production line—to back them up.

Second, in 2006, an estimated 47 million people in the United States did not have health insurance (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2007). This might have included you because many college students are too old to be carried on their parents' insurance, and yet do not have the cash to afford a policy. It included many families who live at a socioeconomic level only slightly higher than the poverty level. That means that they did not qualify for Medicaid, but they also did not have the money to pay for health insurance. The costs of food, housing, clothing, and transportation needed to come first. Bills that would establish universal health insurance have been defeated multiple times since the first U.S. proposal in 1913, partially due to the combined corporate voices of the medical profession, pharmaceutical companies, and insurance companies, among others. These well-funded, well-organized organizations representing hundreds of companies have been extremely successful in helping to maintain the current health care system with its expensive access (Center for Public Integrity, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; West, Heith, & Goodwin, 1996). Ford (1999) concluded that the American Medical Association's rhetorical strategies, in concert with other trade organizations' strategies, helped to defeat the 1993 proposal to provide all Americans with health insurance. The plan's defeat meant that many Americans with low and middle incomes had little access to health care other than through the emergency room, the most expensive type of health care available.

This chapter explores how organizational communication scholars have applied principles of critical theory to understand how power is created and maintained in organizations. Specifically, we will discuss a perspective that questions how organizations use rhetorical strategies in order to establish and maintain their power in society. In order to understand this perspective, we first introduce a brief history of the critical approach in organizational communication. Then we discuss the key concepts in the critical approach to organization studies and organizational rhetoric.

❖ HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The critical approach to organizational communication (including organizational rhetoric) grew out of two primary concerns. First, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, interpretive approaches (in contrast to quantitative approaches) to studies of organizational behavior primarily focused on describing how meanings were created in organizations. While these were useful questions, scholars (e.g., Mumby, 1997) questioned why differences in power among organizational members were not considered in these interpretive studies. In other words, critical scholars asked, when one person has more power than another, does that difference in power influence whether an idea comes to have one meaning rather than another? How do employees resist such control?

A second key concern in critical research challenged the managerial bias of traditional organizational research (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). This means that critical scholars challenged the assumption of many organizational researchers that research findings should help managers control organizational behaviors. Critical scholars asked how research findings could help everyone, in all organizational positions, participate more fully in what happened in the organization.

The critical approach also emerged from an application of various critical philosophies to organization studies.¹ For example, organizational communication scholar Stan Deetz (e.g., 1982) has applied the work of the French critical philosopher Foucault, among others, to the study of organizational dynamics. The critical philosophies applied were those of 19th- and 20th-century philosophers who were writing in response to the strong Western European and Russian military influences, and the capitalist influence of the United States, prior to, during, and following the two world wars. Gramsci (1971), for example, was writing in response to his imprisonment by Mussolini prior to World War II. The organizational communication scholar Dennis Mumby (e.g., 1997) often applies Gramsci's concept of hegemony (to be discussed later) in the development of his ideas.

At about the same time that critical approaches to organizational communication were emerging, a critical theory movement in rhetoric also was emerging (e.g., Aune, 1983; McKerrow, 1989; Wander, 1983). Rhetorical scholars (e.g., Conrad, 1983, 1988) were beginning to examine those same processes of power construction in organizations using rhetorical methods.

Regardless of rhetorician or social scientist stance, a critical philosopher's overarching goal is to discuss ways in which state power could be resisted by individuals; thus their emphasis either was on power/domination or on resistance. As this work has evolved over the last 20 years in organization studies, a newer critical perspective has emerged: These more recent theorists argue that power and resistance are usefully understood as intertwined ideas, meaning that power and resistance function together (in other words, as a dialectic; e.g., Ashcraft, 2005; Mumby, 1997). In addition, scholarship focusing on the roles of gender, race, class, and work/life balance has emerged from this critical tradition (for examples, see Ashcraft, 2005; Ashcraft & Allen, 2003; Clair, 1993; Cloud, 2005; Kirby & Krone, 2002).

❖ KEY IDEAS IN CRITICAL APPROACHES TO ORGANIZATION STUDIES AND ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC

Several concepts support the majority of critical approaches to organizational communication, rhetorical theory, and organizational rhetoric. First, critical approaches to organizational communication assume that "messages can never be neutral" (German, 1995, p. 280). Working from the idea that one message can be interpreted in many ways by the various people involved, the critical theorist examines how organizations try to impose or fix meanings to advance the organization's interests. These organizational interests are often privileged at the expense of other, less powerful interests (Mumby, 2004). For example, in 1996, Nike responded to accusations of using sweatshop labor by trying to establish that using sweatshop labor was a legitimate business strategy in the arena in which it was operating (McHale, Zompetti, & Moffit, 2007). Therefore, Nike argued (or implied enthymematically), it had not violated societal expectations about how it should treat its employees and was thus a "good" organization.

A second basic concept upon which critical theory rests is that all organizational members, leaders, and followers must make choices. You might respond, "Well of course organizations make choices. So what?" A critical theorist does not just assume that choices are/were made; the critical theorist *foregrounds* the idea that there exists an "ability to act otherwise" within all humans, although that ability may range from very constrained to very extensive" (Mumby, 2004, p. 242).

A rhetorical critic working from a critical organizational perspective asks how an organization presents those choices to its constituents in its messages and then examines the consequences of those choices.

More specifically, stakeholder theorists (Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2007; Lewis, 2007) argue that organizations have multiple groups of people who have various “stakes,” and whose needs must be met in a variety of ways for the organization to thrive. (For an alternative perspective featuring *stakeseekers*, see Heath & Palenchar, 2009.) Stakeholders include groups such as employees, stockholders, customers, suppliers, vendors, the media, and so forth. The choices of so many constituents present a tangle (and invariably conflicts) for organizational message designers that must be addressed (J. McMillan, personal communication, September, 2008). The critical organizational rhetoric scholar seeks to unravel those tangles by examining the organization’s messages.

For example, an organization may be considering minimally following environmental protection laws in order to increase profits for stockholders, but that decision is likely to continue to contribute to pollution in an organization’s physical community. When these conflicts of interest arise, critical rhetorical scholars specifically ask how those decisions are constructed and presented through an organization’s messages. When those decisions are made and presented to the various groups, organizational rhetoric scholars examine the types of messages used to promote the organization’s decisions.

In a related basic concept, critical approaches to organizational rhetoric also focus upon the voices of the various players involved. First, not all voices have equal access for presenting their interests. As we implied above, when organizational decisions are made, some stakeholders will see benefits and others will pay a price. Often those who pay a price are those stakeholders who have less power to influence the organization’s decision makers. In essence, those stakeholders’ voices are minimized or marginalized. Sometimes it is not obvious at first glance exactly whose voices are minimized, marginalized, or left out. It takes careful analysis on the critic’s part to consider whose concerns are being overlooked, left out, or silenced. In other words, one of the critic’s roles is to help give “the voiceless a voice” (Deetz, 1992, p. 4; see also Alvesson & Deetz, 2003).

For example, in most universities and colleges, students have a voice in how student fees are distributed to support various student organizations on campus. Often the groups responsible for these decisions are part of student government. In contrast, students often have

little voice in decisions about which faculty members are hired. In those cases, student voices are marginalized.

Other questions of voice involve groups of individual organizations (nonprofits or corporations) that are presented as if they had one voice. Here are two examples. First, PhRMA, the Pharmaceutical Researchers and Manufacturers of America, is actually an interest group whose members include over 60 large pharmaceutical companies (PhRMA, 2007). By advocating specific positions as a group under PhRMA's identity, individual pharmaceutical companies may lobby for less-popular positions among their customer bases or within their industry with less risk to their individual identities or brands.

While these organizations certainly have the right to organize themselves in this way, the individual organizational members are shielded somewhat from direct consumer response to less-popular positions. Any particular member organization in question could disassociate itself from PhRMA's messages, reducing negative consequences to itself. In another example, it is less identity-threatening for the Recording Industry Association of America to issue confrontational advertisements asking people to stop illegally downloading music than for Sony to run the same advertisement. Responsibility for a message becomes diffused, leading the critical scholar to ask whose interests are being served with a particular message.

The Alliance for Managed Competition served a similar function for five individual insurance companies (Aetna Life and Casualty Corporation, Cigna Corporation, Metropolitan Life Insurance, Prudential Life Insurance, and Travelers Life Insurance) during the 1993–1994 health care reform debate (Schwartz, 1993). These “big 5” insurance companies actually supported the concept of universal coverage (health insurance for all U.S. citizens), as proposed in the Health Security Act, but that support was in conflict with the many smaller health insurance companies who would have been threatened by a universal health insurance plan. It is particularly important to examine the voices of, and the interests represented by, organizations whose identity is masked (Wander, 1983).

The following propositions form the foundation for critical approaches to organizational communication: (1) Messages are not neutral, (2) organizational members (leaders and followers) are choice makers, (3) organizational members' voices have a range of influence, and (4) an organization's voice is not always clearly identifiable. Key concepts of the critical approach to organizational rhetoric emerge

from these foundations: power and the “discourse of suspicion,” ideology, and hegemony. We discuss these key concepts next. In addition, we will discuss a critical bent to the concepts of organizational voice and publics.

Discourse of Suspicion and the Construction of Power

Since critical organizational theorists assume that messages are not neutral, that not all voices have an equal range of influence, and organizational voices are not always clearly identifiable, they work from the position that organizational stakeholders are in an ongoing struggle involving power (especially in terms of domination) and resistance to that power. Critical theorists are working to uncover sources of hidden or taken-for-granted power so that those whose freedom is more limited (usually employees, customers, or community members) than that of others (usually organizations as a whole and organizational leaders) can have more influence (voice) in what happens in their lives. More specifically, from the work of many critical theorists emerges a “discourse of suspicion” (Mumby, 2004, p. 237); in other words, critical theorists are suspicious of what organizations are up to. Mumby explains that this discourse of suspicion is a perspective for revealing the relationships among discourse (messages), ideology (discussed below), and deep-structure relations of power, particularly in the context of organizations. Thus, we might say that critical theorists believe there is more going on in messages than may appear on the surface.

Assuming this suspicious posture may feel somewhat depressing at times because it tends to emphasize the constraints within which we work, volunteer, or function as members of society. However, Deetz (1992) argues that this perspective actually reveals a measure of hope: From the process of revealing the sources of power and resistance (critique), organizational stakeholders (and others in society) can make changes in what is said and done in ways that may make the consequences of organizational actions less harmful to stakeholders, communities, and society as a whole.

German (1995) argues, “If we understand the implicit assumptions that frame our communication about such social priorities, then we can make more informed choices” (p. 281). At least the results may “make us aware of competing positions and interpretations” (Hauser, 1998, p. 100). For example, pharmaceutical companies argue that their patents for medicines they invent should last

as long as possible before generically equivalent drugs can be created and sold. They assert that they need a longer-term patent in order to generate the profits to fund new pharmaceutical research. However, the prices of generically equivalent drugs are much lower than the original drugs, and therefore are more affordable to the average consumer. As a society, we have to examine the needs of the pharmaceutical companies to make a profit in order to stay in business and create new drugs (e.g., cancer drugs, AIDS drugs, etc.), as well as the needs of consumers to afford the drugs prescribed for their conditions.

The construction of *power* also is a central concept in critical approaches to organizational communication and organizational rhetoric. Specifically, critical approaches to organizational communication examine the ways in which power is constructed through communicative/rhetorical practices, or talk (messages). If you studied perspectives on power in a political science course, you likely would examine power in terms of raw force (e.g., military strength), arbitrary decision making (e.g., a monarchy), and monetary influence (e.g., contributions to campaigns), among others. In a business course, you likely would examine power in terms of control of raw materials or other types of resources (e.g., knowledge management), leadership, and management of bureaucracy (e.g., implementation of rules and regulations), and so forth. In a sociology course, you likely would examine power in terms of social characteristics, such as class, race, and gender. While all of these perspectives are certainly useful, they provide incomplete explanations for how organizations advocate for their interests.

From a critical organizational communication perspective, “what counts as power involves struggles over meaning” (Mumby, 2001, p. 593). In other words, the “stuff” of which organizational power is made is more than observable behavior and decision making, the control of resources, or social characteristics, although those issues certainly are present. Instead, power is understood as the ways in which basic forms of perception and social reality get constructed through language choices and communication processes (Mumby, 2004). Negotiating, forming perceptions, creating images, shaping stakeholder beliefs, and managing stakeholder consent to organizational values, all of which are grounded in carefully crafted rhetoric, are all examples of key strategies by which organizations create a meaning system that favors their interests over those of other stakeholders (Conrad, 1983; Mumby, 2001, 2004).

A critical organizational rhetoric perspective also draws attention to the balance of power among organizations and individuals in the public dialogue, and access to processes of message production. Critical organizational rhetoric scholars aim to challenge the domination of the organizational voice in our society by examining public messages (those messages designed for the organization's nonemployees; German, 1995). As we discussed earlier, in contrast to individuals, generally large organizations (including corporate, nonprofit, and governmental organizations) wield much more influence on society because they have the financial resources to access media outlets that most individuals do not have. While the Internet offers individuals access to broad audiences in ways not possible in the past, individuals still do not have the same access to more expensive media that larger organizations do. Thus, critical theory specifically asks us to "consider 'who' is really speaking when the organization makes a public announcement or participates in a social debate, as well as whose interests are being served as it does so" (Meisenbach & McMillan, 2006, p. 123). When the "organization" speaks, questions of authorship, intent, audience, and responsibility for what is said, as well as of the message's consequences, must be raised (German, 1995).

In addition, the critical perspective asks us to consider the consequences of organizations' and individuals' unequal capacity to control how messages are produced, distributed, and consumed (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Most individuals and smaller organizations do not have the capital, the time, or other resources that large corporations do to design and distribute messages to mass audiences. Individual access to the Internet has changed that to some extent, but access to network television for message distribution, for example, normally is beyond the scope of most individuals and smaller organizations.

Critical organizational rhetoric scholars also specifically consider issues of power and voice of organizational members (usually employees), particularly those who have less status in an organization (Cheney & Christensen, 2001b). In contrast to early 1900s management approaches that featured ways to coerce employees to do their work, many of today's organizational members must be persuaded, not coerced, to work within the organization's parameters and advance the organization's goals (Bisel, Ford, & Keyton, 2007; Cloud, 2005; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Such persuasive messages, as well as who has the voice to influence design and distribution of those messages, are key

issues for critical organizational rhetoric scholars who examine rhetoric primarily designed for an organization's employees and potential employees (e.g., Hoffman & Cowan, 2008).

In summary, the critical theorist approaches organizational messages suspiciously, asking "what is this organization up to"; works to untangle the construction of power in a particular situation; and raises the question of unequal voices or whose interests are being served by a message or set of messages.

Ideology

Closely related to the construct of power is the construct of ideology. From Foss's (2004) perspective, *ideology* is a "pattern of beliefs that determines a group's interpretations of some aspects of the world" (p. 239). Marx used the term *ideology* to refer to the ruling ideas of the ruling class (Wander, 1983). Critical scholars question how and whether the ruling ideas of the powerful should guide the creation of meaning by those who are ruled. For example, should advertisers, religious organizations, or government determine what "family" means, or should that be determined by family members?

Mumby (2001) argues that in the context of organizational communication studies, ideology concerns the ways in which the identities of organization members are constructed through the ways we talk and write at work. It is through such symbol use that power relations are produced, maintained, or transformed. As Mumby (1987) explains more specifically, "Ideology provides the underlying logic which guides and constrains discourse, while at the same time discourse is the means by which ideology is continually produced and reproduced" (p. 302). In other words, the way we talk—literally, the words we choose to use—impact how those people we work with understand what we and they can do at work (e.g., what projects we take on, what benefits we take advantage of, etc.), as well as how we and they do our work (e.g., how late we work at night, whether we work in teams, etc.).

Kirby and Krone (2002) describe a process of ideological enactment in an organization that constrains the choices its employees make. Employees of an auditing organization are allowed to take paternity leave at the birth of a child; however, few male employees actually take paternity leave in this organization. Why do fathers in this organization feel that they cannot take this leave? A variety of unwritten rules are played out in conversations among coworkers that influence

fathers' decisions to not take advantage of the policy. These rules help the organization's leadership ensure that the work gets done, without regard to the sacrifices of the individual employees. Let's examine how this process occurred in this organization.

Ideologically, the policy itself confirmed that the organization's leaders are in power because the leaders are the ones who "allow" an employee to take leave. But going beyond this clear example of power, the issue was that few take advantage of the leave available, despite the policy that allows it. This must mean that there was something keeping the fathers from requesting leave.

An unwritten component of the organization's ideology was revealed in that the organization's work must still be completed in the absence of the employee. It was left up to the team members to get this work done without additional support (e.g., temporary help, bonuses for coworkers who take on extra work). This further established that the organization's leaders have the power to say who has to complete the work, but it also began to limit the team members' options. The managers never outright said, "You are not allowed to take paternity leave." Instead, communicative interactions among team members created pressure (like peer pressure) that prevented fathers from taking leave. In other words, the fathers were made to feel so uncomfortable about asking for leave that they *chose* not to ask for it.

Specifically, coworkers discouraged each other from actually taking paternity leave by what they said to each other. The work left by the person on leave still had to be covered by another member of the work team, and the remaining team members were reluctant to take on loads beyond their own duties. So, by making negative comments among themselves about leave taken by other coworkers (e.g., "He gets to take time off every week for his kid's baseball game"), team members discouraged fathers from taking paternity leave. In addition, managers did not outright encourage fathers to take the leave anyway. These combined messages made choosing not to take the leave appear to be legitimate. This discouragement by team members, and lack of encouragement on the leaders' parts, reproduced the unwritten rule that the organization's work must be done at the expense of personal priorities.

Where was the organizational rhetoric in this situation? In this case, the key is in what was *not* in written messages. For example, had the organization wanted to demonstrate that it actually did support fathers taking leave time (versus merely stating in its benefits statement that the policy was available), the organization might have

included a procedure in its document about how to request the time off. More importantly, a procedure for managers could have been included that describes how to equitably redistribute workloads, or how to hire temporary help, so that individual employees did not have to pressure their colleagues to take on additional work by default. Even more visible to employees might have been stories (or at least blurbs) about the births of employees' children published in organizational newsletters. Because such rhetorical messages were missing, the company's influence over fathers' individual behavior was hidden.

Another example more specifically illustrates how organizations' ideologies were at work to subtly limit the understanding of their employee audiences. Hoffman and Cowan (2008) analyzed 50 company Web pages concerning work/life balance. The rhetoric of these organizations attempted to define for employees the meaning of "life" outside of work, and encouraged employees to view organizational objectives on a par with personal interests. Most importantly, the organizations used their own definitions of what was work, what was "life," and what constitutes a work/life balance. These organizations did not open a space for individuals to define for themselves what work/life balance meant to them individually.

These examples illustrate that ideologies are keys to understanding the ways in which power is enacted by organizations through rhetorical strategies when outright coercion (threat of firing, physical coercion) is not used (see also Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). In essence, this research focuses on "describing the practices and routines by which alternatives are disregarded or rendered invisible" (Deetz, 1992, p. 59).

Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1979) outlined a set of questions that we can ask to examine hidden practices like we have discussed above. He called these questions *ideological aspects of symbolic orders* (messages) (see also McKerrow, 1989). Giddens argued that three principal ideological forms (ways things are said) are used to strategically conceal sectional interest (in this case, an organization's interests). In the first ideological form, we would ask the following: How are sectional (organizational) interests represented as universal interests? For example, a manager's views traditionally are accepted without question as representing a department's situation, rather than employees' views of a department's situation (Alvesson & Deetz, 2003). Yet we know that some organizations have learned that certain decisions need to be made by those who have the most

contact with customers, such as customer service representatives or sales agents.

In the second ideological form, we would ask the following: How are contradictions denied or transmuted? In other words, are contradictions in what is said either not acknowledged, or is our attention drawn away from what is going on in the message? For example, in the development of Medicare Part D (prescription drug coverage for seniors), it was not always clear to the general public that the addition of Medicare prescription coverage for those over 65 or who are disabled would cover costs only in certain ranges of annual cost (Pear, 2006). Medicare would cover prescription costs up to \$2,250 per year, and then stop covering until an individual's prescription costs reached \$5,100 per year. It took extensive press coverage to reveal this "donut hole" in coverage so that Medicare recipients could understand that they would still be responsible for over \$1,000 in prescription costs per year. (Many prescriptions for people over the age of 65 can run as high as \$100 per month for one prescription.) This contradiction in terms, "Medicare Part D will cover prescription costs for seniors," when it only covers to specific limits, was transmuted, or downplayed, by those who wrote the bill.

In Giddens's third ideological form, we would ask, What is occurring in the present that is naturalized—that is, made to seem unchangeable, when it really is changeable? By making the meaning-making process less transparent or obvious, organizational decisions are no longer seen as choices but as natural, self-evident, and "required" actions (Alvesson & Deetz, 2003). As humans, we often construct structures that seem to take on an objective, "natural" existence, independent from the fact that we are the ones who constructed them (Mumby, 2001). For example, at one time bureaucratic structures in organizations (rule-driven, chain-of-command ways to organize) had been as accepted as the best, and often the only way, to organize. These methods of structuring organizations seemed "natural." Yet organizations today are learning to organize with more flexible structures, such as web-like structures, or distributed or virtual organizations, that allow these organizations to more easily adapt to environmental changes.

In summary, the goal of ideological critique in organizational rhetoric is to reveal how power is hidden in messages. When we evaluate rhetoric critically (in this critical theory sense), we want to call into question the circumstances that appear to exist by common sense. These commonsense understandings may privilege organizational

interests and goals over other individual or societal interests and goals, thereby creating conditions that may be harmful or oppressive to those who have less power (in our case, employees; Mumby, 1993). In other words, we may find that organizational rhetoric masks actions that may not be in the best interest of all groups of organizational stakeholders.

Hegemony and Whose Meaning “Wins”

The third key concept in critical approaches to organizational communication is hegemony. *Hegemony* involves the “struggle over systems of meaning and the processes by which social reality is framed” (Mumby, 1997, p. 364). Clearly the concept of hegemony is related to the concept of ideology as discussed above. Whereas ideological critique asks us to use a particular set of questions to examine whose interests are served by a message, hegemony focuses more specifically on the relationship between power and resistance. More specifically, hegemony may be distinguished from ideology by its emphasis on the process of struggle to determine whose meaning “wins.”

For example, for over 100 years, physicians have sought to define the scope of medical practice in ways that limit the scopes of practice for other health care providers such as nurses, chiropractors, physical therapists, pharmacists, and so forth (Friedson, 1970/1998; Starr, 1982). This limitation is accomplished through policy development (regulations), as well as through messages in the media. However, as health care costs have skyrocketed, these other health care providers have demonstrated through research that allied health care professionals provide certain types of care equally well (using protocols approved by physicians), and more cost-effectively than physicians do. Thus, the legal scope of practice of nonphysician providers, such as physician assistants and nurse practitioners (usually nurses with master’s degrees), has expanded over the years. While physicians clearly still wield considerable hegemonic power in the health care system, balances to such power have emerged. This competition, so to speak, over who should be allowed to do which type of work takes place through rhetoric directed at various audiences.

These contests over whose system(s) of meaning would prevail were initially described essentially as two-sided: one side the dominator, the other the repressed. Specifically, the question of hegemony originally asked the critic to examine how the repressed side participates in its own repression. A common example is when women argue

that men should control an organization's hierarchy. The concept of hegemony has morphed into at least two different forms over time, but both perspectives seek to account for more than the two "voices" of the dominant and the oppressed. First, Condit (1994) argued that critiques of hegemonic struggles over policy acceptance are actually better described as a *critique of concord*. She explains,

Social concord is the active or passive acceptance of a given social policy or political framework as the best that can be negotiated under the given conditions. . . . Concord is neither harmonious nor inevitably fair or equitable, it is simply the best that can be done under the circumstances. (p. 10)

A critique of such concord seeks to understand how multiple voices influenced the acceptance (or rejection) of particular policies. By seeking to account for the ways in which the individual organizations incorporated other organizations' interests into their own messages, an argument can be made for how a different public policy results from that which any single organization would have advocated. The process of hegemony from Condit's (1994) perspective, then, is more complex than earlier descriptions of it.

The second perspective on hegemony that more recent theories have taken also tries to account for more than two broad voices of domination and resistance (McKerrow, 1989). This form, advocated by Ashcraft (2005), Mumby (1997), and others, seeks to explain how the same "discursive space" reveals aspects of both domination and resistance. In other words, "even overt consent may constitute a form of resistance" (Ashcraft, 2005, p. 69). Thus, both newer explanations of hegemony recognize that the process of forming consent is more complicated than once thought (Fleming & Spicer, 2008).

Corporate Voice

The idea of corporate voice is not limited to critical theory approaches to understanding organizations or organizational rhetoric. It is also not limited to corporate organizations; nonprofit and governmental organizations also use corporate voice. *Corporate voice* is used to refer to the generally faceless, nonspecific source of organizational messages. These types of messages are rarely attributed to the CEO, public relations professional, or other organizational member who designed the message. The concept of corporate voice was one of the defining characteristics of organizational rhetoric from its earliest theoretical

descriptions (e.g., Cheney, 1983; Cheney, 1991; Cheney & McMillan, 1990). However, the concept of corporate voice is key to understanding how organizations rhetorically position themselves to achieve their goals, whether that is building an image, influencing a policy, or responding to a crisis, among other goals.

The idea of corporate voice emerges from the legal concept that an organization is due the same protections as a person. This concept of organization-as-person was established by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1886 (*Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific*, 1886; Cheney & McMillan, 1990). As Cheney (1991) explains, "The organization became in effect a *natural* person" (p. 5; emphasis in original). Today, that voice is the "loudest in the land" (Schiller, 1989, p. 4)—louder than religious institutions as a group or the government as a whole, for example, and much louder than any one individual.

Corporate voice is that disembodied "we," often used in statements by those representing the organization, regardless of whether it is for-profit, nonprofit, or governmental. Examples include, "The American Red Cross said today . . ." or "Wal-Mart explained . . ." While CEOs or other spokespersons often speak on behalf of an organization, it usually is assumed in American culture that the individual is not speaking on behalf of her- or himself, but rather is saying what the organization would say. The corporate "we" often appears in the passive voice, which gives it an air of being from an impersonal, collective source (Cheney & McMillan, 1990).

As Cheney (1991) notes, "Organizational messages take on a relatively placeless, nameless, omniscient quality, even when a corporate identity is assumed and declared" (p. 5). Thus, the critical organizational rhetoric scholar would ask "who is really speaking when the organization makes a public announcement or participates in a social debate, as well as whose interests are being served as it does so" (Meisenbach & McMillan, 2006, p. 123). In other words, the critical scholar of organizational rhetoric wants to reveal the often unstated purpose behind the organization's statements. Sometimes that purpose serves both the organization and selected stakeholder groups, including the community; sometimes the purpose serves only the organization.

"The" Public

As argued in Chapter 1, the concept of audiences or publics is a key component in understanding rhetoric overall and organizational rhetoric specifically. However, in the context of critical approaches to

organizational rhetoric, the concept of the public takes on a slightly different twist. Understanding a critical perspective on the concept of publics or audiences in organizational rhetoric begins with the description that we used in Chapter 1: those audiences that are important to the operation of the organization. Those audiences have multiple and often conflicting interests. Audiences important to an organization will vary, but may include customers, stockholders, employees, volunteers, regulatory agencies, and the communities of which the organization is a part.

This definition follows a traditional, managerially focused idea of audience or public. In other words, these audiences or publics are defined by the organization, from the organization's perspective. By this definition, these audiences are considered a rather permanent collection of individuals with an enduring set of attitudes, demographics, and geographic locations (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). Hauser (1998) stated that a poll would describe a public as a fixed meaning "in the frozen frame of a statistic" (p. 91). These publics are also generally considered passive, waiting for organizations to communicate with them, rather than "individuals actively involved in the ongoing construction of their own identities, strategies or goals" (Leitch & Neilson, 2001, p. 128). Thus, publics that are not defined as important to the organization are marginalized, or left out of conversations or actions that may have consequences for them because the organization feels it knows what is best for them (Karlberg, 1996).

Critical descriptions of publics assume a much more fluid, active definition that specifically acknowledges publics as groups of individuals. Vasquez and Taylor (2001) describe this view of publics as "a situationally developing social entity that emerges through spontaneous argument, discussion, and collective opposition to some issue or problematic situation" (p. 142). In other words, a public or audience *per se* may not exist until a group of people come together to agree or disagree with an organization's actions. For example, in 2007–2008, there were publics that emerged to support the building of two coal electricity plants in western Kansas, as well as publics that emerged to resist the building of the plants. Neither of those "publics" existed until the proposal to develop such coal-powered electricity plants was presented to Kansas governmental decision makers, but as people reacted to the proposal both negatively and positively, the publics emerged.

The critical perspective on audiences assumes that individuals within these groups participate as members of many publics or audiences that vary over time and circumstances. Consider how you may be a member of your college department, an employee of an organization, a member of

a religious organization, and a volunteer for Big Brothers/Big Sisters of America. That means you are a member of at least four publics or audiences. Your membership in the religious organization (as well as other factors) may have influenced which college you decided to attend. So, your memberships in various publics may influence your memberships or actions in other publics, thus making your participation in a particular organization difficult to project as a statistic.

From a critical theory perspective, then, an organization's audiences or publics may be (1) defined by an organization or (2) defined by the publics themselves. If they are defined by an organization, then that organization may acknowledge that such publics are changing groups that may or may not acquiesce to the organization's messages. Leitch and Neilson (2001) explain, "There is no guarantee that such publics will be content with their status as organizational artifacts or will accept the meanings that organizations have imposed upon them" (p. 137). If a public is defined by the public itself, then this public-centered perspective may "expose the links as well as the disconnects between organization and public values, underscoring the importance for practitioners to provide meaningful contributions to the public-organization dialogue, creating, negotiating, and codefining meaning with publics" (Edwards, 2006, p. 836).

This perspective creates space for the idea that members of various publics participate in a conversation with an organization, rather than an organization working with just those publics it defines as linking with its interests (Leitch & Neilson, 2001). Creating space for a wide variety of voices to participate is a key goal of critical theory.

❖ SUMMARY OF KEY CONCEPTS IN CRITICAL THEORY/PERSPECTIVES

As has been shown, critical perspectives in organizational rhetoric draw our attention to several key issues:

- Power, particularly in relation to three concerns: (1) who has the right to speak in and for organizational decisions, (2) how organizations wield rhetorical influence to maintain the status quo in society, and (3) how an organization's publics might gain a voice in dialogues about organizational action;
- Choice, first in relation to the idea that all humans, but especially those in organizational leadership positions, have "the ability to act otherwise" (Mumby, 2004, p. 242);

- Voice, with two particular emphases: (1) analyzing the disembodied voice of the organization (corporate voice), and (2) creating space for voices beyond the corporate voice to be heard and acted upon in organizational decision making (McMillan, 2007); and
- The consequentiality of messages, in particular that organizational messages are not neutral; the message choices that organizations make have consequences for their members, as well as the society and communities of which it is a part.

(See Table 4.1 on p. 101 for a summary of characteristics of critical organizational rhetoric.) The combined ideas of power, choice, voice, and the consequentiality of messages lead us to a place where action is required of us. Such action may be our individual decisions about how we interact with an organization as a customer, an employee, or a community member. Such action may be our decisions about how we run an organization, if we become leaders. For now, such action concerns the questions we use to critique the rhetorical decisions made by organizations to build their identities; manage their impressions; or manage issues that affect them in terms of regulation, crisis, or risk. More importantly from the critical perspective, the answers to the questions of power and resistance help us analyze an organization's symbolic actions in terms of whether it is acting fairly and ethically. Our particular focus as critical organizational rhetoricians is on the organization's choices made about *voice* and *choice* as those are demonstrated in its messages.

❖ MAKING CHOICES: ETHICS AND ORGANIZATIONAL RHETORIC

Ethical choices among rhetorical actions are made based on sets of values. Conrad (1993b) defined values as "abstract and not-empirically verifiable beliefs" (p. 2). Examples of values (discussed in Chapter 2) include honesty and fair play. Values also are the basis of laws, such as truth-in-advertising laws. However, many decisions cannot be made merely upon the basis of a law. Particularly where there is no specific rule or law to follow in making a choice, ethics plays a role in decision making. As Fitzpatrick (2006) states, "Law is what people *must* do, while ethics is about what people *should* do. . . . Ethics begins where the law ends. Law is about compliance with set rules and procedures, while ethics involves more discretionary decision making" (p. 2).

There are many sources of criteria for making ethical decisions. Religious texts, such as the Bible, the Quran, and the Torah, provide sources of guiding principles for many people. For hundreds of years, philosophers such as Confucius, Aristotle, Kant, and Mills, among many others, have sought to establish sets of guiding principles for ethical decision making. Examples of such classic principles include the Golden Rule (i.e., "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you") and "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few." All of these are useful sources of guidance for those trying to make ethical decisions. However, as in most contexts, they are difficult to apply in the organizational context. Conrad (1993a) argues, "Organizational decision makers often are 'caught' between complex decision situations and varied and incongruent sets of values" (p. 11). He calls the interrelationships among values, ethics, and organizational decision making the "ethical nexus," to illustrate the complexity of such problems as "inherently problematic" (1993b, p. 2).

The purpose of this section is not to summarize the various ethical frameworks offered in countless philosophy and business textbooks. Rather, it is to highlight the assumptions advocated by critical theorists in judging rhetorical choices made by organizations, and to discuss the broad set of values themselves. These assumptions may be grouped into two broad categories of *voice* and *choice*.

A key assumption upon which values advocated by critical theorists rely is that organizations need to incorporate and act upon a broader range of voices in organizational decisions. Deetz (2003) explains, "The question is not whether but *whose* and *what* values get represented. Top executives do not lack values and do not hesitate using them implicitly in decision making. Competing values, however, do not have an opportunity to enter into the decision process" (p. 608, emphasis added; see also Conrad, 1993a). More specifically, Meisenbach and McMillan (2006) argue, "From a critical perspective, it may be less important whether organizations are allowed to 'speak' than whether they welcome other rhetors to the table" (p. 124).

As discussed earlier, a related key assumption upon which values advocated by critical theorists rely is that organizations must make choices. Early models of stakeholder theory assume that some organizational stakeholders will see benefits from those choices, and other stakeholders will pay a price (e.g., Freeman, 1984). In this perspective, stakeholders are identified by their power to influence the firm, the legitimacy of the stakeholder's relationship with the firm, and the urgency of the stakeholder's relationship with the firm (Mitchell, Agle,

& Wood, 1997). The primary stakeholder who benefits from these choices often has been the shareholder or financier of the organization. This perspective, based upon organizational survival as the prime goal, "drives organizational rhetoric toward a celebration of the organization itself . . . a stance now so familiar that citizens often forget that it represents a *choice*" (Cheney & McMillan, 1990, p. 105, emphasis in original). Often those who pay a larger price are those stakeholders who have less power to influence the organization's decision makers. In essence, consistent with the first assumption, those stakeholders' voices with less influence are minimized or marginalized. Sometimes it is not obvious whose voices are minimized or marginalized, so it takes careful analysis on the critic's part to consider whose concerns are being overlooked, left out, or silenced.

A stakeholder perspective emerging as this book is being written reframes stakeholder theory (Freeman et al., 2007; Lewis, 2007). This perspective recognizes that "alliances, or competitive relationships, among stakeholders of a given organization . . . give rise to a more complex stakeholder picture than the portrait of a manager assessing stakes and stakeholders and allocating resources accordingly" (Lewis, 2007, p. 193). This newer model of stakeholder theory far more inclusively recognizes the voices of groups that organizations need to include in their decision making. While still more managerially focused than most critical theorists likely would support, Freeman et al. advocate for far more recognition of, and participation by, a variety of organizational audiences than past models did. At minimum, the model now recognizes the various communities in which organizations are enmeshed as a set of the primary stakeholders for organizations. The authors also advocate for managers to consider what is best for *all stakeholders*, rather than just what is best for shareholders (when dealing with corporate organizations), advisory boards (when dealing with nonprofit organizations, such as museums), or legislative oversight groups (when dealing with governmental agencies), when managers make choices among organizational actions, including rhetorical choices.

Based upon these concepts of more inclusive voice and choice, the following values emerge from various critical theorists for making ethical decisions:

- *Open discussion* in order to provide "the fundamental opportunity for truth. If the message functions to constrict audience participation, then it lacks truth, since it exploits unexamined social values" (German, 1995, p. 292);

- Free discussion based upon *goodwill, argumentation, and dialogue*, rather than decisions based upon authority, tradition, ideology, or exclusion of participants (Alvesson & Deetz, 2003, p. 202; McMillan, 2007); and
- Exploration of statements on a basis of *comprehensibility* (clarity), *sincerity, truthfulness, and legitimacy* (Alvesson & Deetz, p. 203; see also Haas, 2001).

Cheney (1992) phrases these values in a more straightforward set of questions that we as critics can use to evaluate organizational messages:

- How do an organization's messages reflect its interests?
- What are the implications of a particular organization's rhetoric for individual audience members?
- What assumptions are made about the organization, its members, other stakeholders, and society in general?
- How are images employed by a corporate rhetor?
- What do those images *say* about the organization and other groups?
- Whose interests are represented by corporate messages? (p. 180)

The answers to these questions, as we examine any set of organizational texts, lead us to explore the set of values listed above, and move us toward evaluating the inclusion of various publics in organizational messages.

❖ CONCLUSION

In conclusion, critical theoretical approaches to organizational rhetoric are challenging to understand and use for evaluating organizational choices, as they are reflected in texts. (See Table 4.1 for a summary of key constructs in critical organizational rhetoric.) It is challenging for organizations to incorporate diverse perspectives, needs, and values into the choices they make. However, as Mumby (2004) reminds us, "Organizations are real structures that have real consequences for real people. Yes, that reality is socially constructed, but I think we must be careful not to forget the material consequences of that social construction process" (p. 252). Critical perspectives on organizational rhetoric provide organizational critics with tools to recognize, value, and examine whether multiple voices are reflected in organizational decision making.

Table 4.1 Characteristics of Critical Approaches to Organizational Rhetoric

Characteristic	Characteristic as it emerges in critical approaches to organizational rhetoric
Basic goal:	“Unmask organizational domination”: Reveal whose social values are being endorsed by the rhetoric
Method:	Ideology critique, cultural criticism, feminist criticism (among others)
Hope:	Reformation of social order to enhance more equitable choices
Metaphor of social relations:	Political (i.e., organizations and their stakeholders attempt to advance their interests in particular ways)
Metaphor of organization:	Polity (i.e., organizations as political arenas)
Problems addressed:	Domination by those in power; consent and resistance of those not in power
Concern with communication:	Systematic distortion, misrecognition
Organizational benefits as a result of this approach:	Participation, expanded knowledge among many stakeholders
Mood:	Suspicious
Social fear:	Authority

SOURCE: Adapted from *Prototypical Discursive Features of Critical Theory Discourse* (Alvesson & Deetz, 2003, p. 198).

❖ NOTE

1. Examples of philosophical approaches that have been applied in organization studies include Foucault (1972; see Deetz, 1992), Giddens (1979; see Mumby, 1987), Gramsci (1971; see Condit, 1994), and Marx (1978; see Cloud, 2005), among others.