Sociopolitical Environments and Issues

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Historically, the field of organizational communication has prioritized analysis of *intra*-organizational interaction. This focus involves a potentially infinite number of interesting and important questions. But it should not imply that organizational communication transcending organizational boundaries is less important. Rather, an organizational analyst might view the embeddedness of organizations in complex and dynamic sociopolitical environments, and the reciprocal influences of each upon the other, as good reason for concentrating even more directly on organizational communication within sociopolitical environments.

A note at the end of this chapter provides citations to a number of recent studies that have explored relationships between organizations and sociopolitical environments.[1] Both the volume and scope of this research demonstrate the vitality of this topic. Most of this current work uses one, or a combination, of three dominant theoretical approaches: (a) population ecology (Aldrich, 1979; Hannan & Carroll, 1992; Hannan & Freeman, 1977), (b) resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), and (c) institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1987; Zucker, 1988). In the previous version of this handbook, Euske and Roberts (1987) outlined the relevance of these three approaches in terms of organizational communication. Their effort represents a helpful step in the development of a communicative approach to the topic of interaction between organizations and environments. Yet like many other examples in the organizational communication literature, the Euske and Roberts chapter is unfortunately limited by the authors' strategy of pinning post hoc "communication implications" onto existing theories that never intended to make communication their primary concern. In this chapter, I attempt to build on the foundation provided by Euske and Roberts. I introduce a new model of sociopolitically oriented organizational communication where the organizational discourses of institutional rhetoric and everyday talk play essential roles.

The chapter is organized into two main parts. The first section elaborates the discourse-centered model of organizations and their relations with their sociopolitical environments. This model extends Karl Weick's (1979) notion of the "enacted" environment and Taylor's (1995) articulation of organizational communication as "conversation." The second part of the chapter applies this model, using as illustration current research on the sociopolitical topics of sexual harassment, and family-work conflict.

The Discursive Model of Organizations and Sociopolitical Environments

Early work on organizational environments emphasized market and technological environments (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Emery & Trist, 1965; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Thompson, 1967). Later, this literature concentrated on sociopolitical environments (Aldrich, 1979; Hannan & Carroll, 1992; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Meyer & Scott, 1983; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991;

Scott, 1987; Zucker, 1988). Whichever its orientation, all this literature is important for the reason that it acknowledges the significance of organizations' across-boundary interaction. Following Euske and Roberts's example, it thus makes sense to use this existing work as the initial foundation for a discursively grounded approach to the analysis of organizations and their relations with sociopolitical environments. Most basically, this discourse-centered model departs from the existing body of organization/environment research over an issue that has long preoccupied investigators. Much of the existing research in the field has assumed that organizations and environments are conceptually and empirically distinct. As a result, much of this work has involved the problem of "boundary specification," which distinguishes the organization from the environment with which it interacts. Its different strategy for handling this question represents the most elemental way in which a discourse-centered perspective prioritizes communication in the analysis of organizations' sociopolitical relations.

As Sutcliffe discusses in Chapter 6 in this handbook, discussion of the boundary specification question has centered on a debate over the comparatively objective or subjective character of organizational environments (Boyd, Dess, & Rasheed, 1993). This distinction has been variously labeled as, for example, a divergence between nominalist (objective) and realist (subjective) environments (Laumann, Marsden, & Prensky, 1983) or between archival (objective) and perceptual (subjective) ones (Boyd et al., 1993). The literature has tended to treat objective and subjective approaches to boundary specification as competing strategies, and the difference between them is easy to comprehend. Objectivists propose to establish empirical criteria for inclusion in the organization; whatever (or whoever) does not meet such criteria for organizational membership by definition then belongs to the organization's environment. Subjectivists are guided by organization members' perceptions of relevant external entities as the appropriate strategy for defining the organizational environment.

The problem of boundary specification is not insignificant, and both objective and subjective solutions have analytical utility if appropriately applied. But from the perspective of the discursive model developed in this chapter, this handling of the boundary specification question has encouraged two undesirable tendencies. First, it has led researchers to exaggerate the fixedness of organizational boundaries. Second, limiting boundary specification to objective and subjective techniques has caused researchers also to overlook the role of social practice, specifically as discourse, in organization-environment relations. At least two authors have created alternative conceptualizations of organization-environment relations that address these problems of boundary specification. Weick's (1979) notion of the "enacted" environment and Taylor's (1995) articulation of organizational "conversation" each lends conceptual support to a discourse-centered perspective on organizational relations within sociopolitical environments.

Weick's concept of the enacted environment addresses the problem of overly concretizing the organization-environment boundary as well as the problem of overlooking discursive social practices in the dynamics of organization and environment relations. In Weick's description, the concept of the enacted environment represents organizational boundaries as neither distinct nor static, but instead, as fundamentally permeable and fluid. According to Weick (1979), "boundaries between organizations and environment are never quite

as clear-cut or stable as many organizational theorists think. These boundaries shift, disappear, and are arbitrarily drawn" (p. 132). Further, Weick's conceptualization of the enacted environment emphasizes the active (if not always self-reflective) role of patterned social practices as organizations and their members comprehend their external environments. According to Weick, enactment is naturally bound up with ecological change. On the one hand, organization members notice environmental occurrences and bracket these for collective attention. On the other hand, collective actions produce ecological change, which lead to other changes, and so on. Thus, in Weick's (1979) terms, "meaningful environments are the outputs of organizing, not inputs to it" (p. 131).

In his elaboration of organizational communication as conversation, Taylor likewise addresses both the issue of boundary precision and the role of social interaction in organization and environment relations. He rejects the notion of the organization-environment boundary as unambiguous, assumedly fixed. While not denying a distinctiveness of organization and environment, Taylor (1995) describes this boundary relationship as "self-generated [by the organization]: a membrane created from within by the process of self-reproduction. … Such boundary-establishing membranes, since they are constructed out of material common to all, do not totally isolate the organism from the world outside" (p. 8). Further, Taylor elaborates even more explicitly than does Weick the basic importance of discursive practices in organizations' communication within their social environments. Manifesting through organizational discourse the autopoietic quality of self-organizing, "an organization is not a physical structure … joined by material channels of communication, but a construction made out of conversation" (Taylor, 1995, p. 22) that simultaneously reflects and reproduces the social reality lived in the interactions of organization members. "Conversations are reflexive and self-organizing: they are produced by communication but are in turn the frame, or envelope, of the communication that generated them, in the absence of which communication would be impossible" (Taylor, 1995, p. 1).

In their ontological innovations, Weick and Taylor accomplish two common outcomes. First, they reduce the conceptual priority of the taken-for-granted separation of organization and environment and identify discursive practice as the principal feature in relationships between organizations and their larger environmental contexts. Second, they encourage an approach to organization-environment relations rooted in discursive process and practice, which the sociopolitically relevant example of "diversity" illustrates.

In analyzing diversity, traditional approaches to organization-environment relations would view the sociopolitical environment as the origin of normative change. Normative evolution would emerge in the form of specific demands regarding diversity, imposed on specific organizations from outside their boundaries. To cope, organizations would need to appropriately respond to these external expectations.

By contrast, Weick's and Taylor's work suggests that changing norms regarding gender and race actually reflect an ongoing cultural discussion occurring simultaneously within organizations and in their larger sociopolitical environments. These overlapping across-boundary conversations sometimes complement and sometimes conflict with, but always reciprocally influence, each other.

Traditional literature on organization-environment relations would also view the implications of diversity,

for relations between organizations and sociopolitical environments, as either material or perceptual. A materialist conceptualization might focus on the numbers of women or minority group members in particular organizational roles, for example. A perceptual frame might examine the extent to which organizational decision makers feel threatened by gender- or race-relevant regulation.

Weick and Taylor concentrate instead on the means by which organizational discourse creates, sustains, or disestablishes particular sociopolitical understandings. This discourse might adopt infinite form. It could emerge as rhetorical labeling, apparent in such terms as *affirmative action, reverse discrimination*, and indeed, the term *diversity* itself. It could appear in patterns of organizational interaction that segregate organization members into subgroups along lines of gender or race. Or this diversity-oriented discourse could show up in the form of specific recruitment and training practices that use interaction to help overcome the often vast perceptual and experiential gaps between members of these subgroups.

What Weick and Taylor do not yet accomplish is the more detailed articulation of discourse processes in organizational relations with sociopolitical environments. Remaining sections of this chapter attempt this, conceptualizing organizations' sociopolitically relevant interaction at the intersecting organizational discourses of "institutional rhetoric" and "everyday talk."

Conceptual Assumptions

Prior to a detailed presentation of the discursive model of organizational communication within sociopolitical environments, several preliminary conceptual assumptions warrant elaboration.

First, the relevant issues for understanding organizational communication within sociopolitical environments involves much more than just the ways in which social change affects (primarily internal) organizational communication "variables." Rather, the discursive practices of and within organizations also influence the larger sociopolitical context (Deetz, 1992), including the direction of social change. This means that organizations do not simply respond communicatively to societal changes that have occurred independent of these organizations' own discursive practices. Rather, organizational discourse contributes largely to the direction and nature of this societal transformation.

Second, to understand organizational discourse in the sociopolitical environment requires consideration of a multitude of diverse perspectives and voices both within and outside the organization. Certainly, organization members and those outside the organization's formal structure hold some common understandings based on their participation within a shared larger culture. Yet these people's experiences and meanings also vary by social location and personal history. The field of organizational communication has barely begun to explore such diversity of human experience. Such analysis is essential, though, to understand organizational discourse within a vastly complex and not necessarily coherent sociopolitical world.

Third, the analysis of sociopolitical issues and their importance for organizational discourse must emphasize politics. Social outcomes, good or bad, are not equally shared, and the preferences of some social interests,

both within and outside organizations, are realized while the preferences of others are not. Thus, there will exist sometimes fierce conflict in the face of social change, and organizational discourse will both reflect and contribute to it. Because many of these issues are deeply affecting, they can involve exceptionally high-stakes conflict. To lose can cost dearly, often in the most essential human terms. Not surprisingly, then, politics are integral to the discussion of organizational discourse and sociopolitical environments.

The model presented in Figure 8.1 conceptualizes organizational interaction with sociopolitical environments as basically composed of the ongoing organizational discourses of institutional rhetoric and everyday talk. Organizational communication in the sociopolitical context includes both the externally directed corporate expression of relatively formal collective entities—"institutional rhetoric"—and the more diffuse but just as pervasive ongoing communication of the partially included individual members who people such collectives—"everyday talk." Adequate conceptualization of sociopolitically relevant organizational discourse must include both institutional rhetoric and everyday talk. Analysis of only one of these forms of discourse would significantly distort the representation of organizations' interaction in the sociopolitical context.

The corporate expression of interest advocacy inherent in practices of institutional rhetoric is relatively easy to recognize as sociopolitically relevant organizational discourse. However, the everyday interaction of individuals with multiple organizational affiliations also represents a significant means by which sociopolitically relevant communication across organizational boundaries is accomplished. Weick's (1979) concept of "partial inclusion" suggests why the discourse of individuals must also represent a primary aspect of the model of organizations' sociopolitical interaction. The idea of partial inclusion refers to the multiple, overlapping collective memberships of individuals. One person may simultaneously hold membership in the collective contexts of work organization, church, political organization, and family, for example. In effect, these individuals produce linkages across organizational boundaries in their everyday talk with different individuals from different organizational contexts. To concentrate analysis only on the institutional voice of formal organizations and neglect the everyday interaction of the individuals who make up organizations would consequently leave out a crucial element of any model of organizations and sociopolitical environments.

Institutional Rhetoric

Sociopolitically relevant organizational discourse in the form of institutional rhetoric involves collective expression intended to influence the larger social normative climate, with outcomes beneficial to the collective. Cheney's (1991) analysis of the rhetorical practices of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States exemplifies this form of discourse. Organizations engage in institutional rhetoric regarding social issues because these issues affect them, sometimes quite deeply. Institutional rhetoric promotes alternative interpretations of the meaning and significance of such changes, especially the degree to which they represent social problems and what policies and actions represent appropriate solutions. The primary role of institutional rhetoric in the discursive model of organizations' sociopolitical relations thus emphasizes the ways in which organizations strategically advocate their own perspectives, attempting to influence wider social meanings.

As a form of organizational discourse, institutional rhetoric demonstrates each of the basic conceptual assumptions that underlies the discursive model of organizations' sociopolitical relations. Organizations that use institutional rhetoric to advocate their perspectives on sociopolitical issues may feel, and indeed, be deeply affected by, sociopolitical change. But they also influence, with varying degrees of conscious intent, the direction of this change. Certainly, the discursive practices of organizations from varied institutional contexts also reflect a multiplicity of social perspectives about which few common generalizations apply. And finally, the interaction among these various organizational viewpoints is clearly marked by often fierce competition for the sometimes zero-sum resource of societal legitimacy.

Figure 8.1. A Model of Sociopolitical Environments and Organizational Discourse
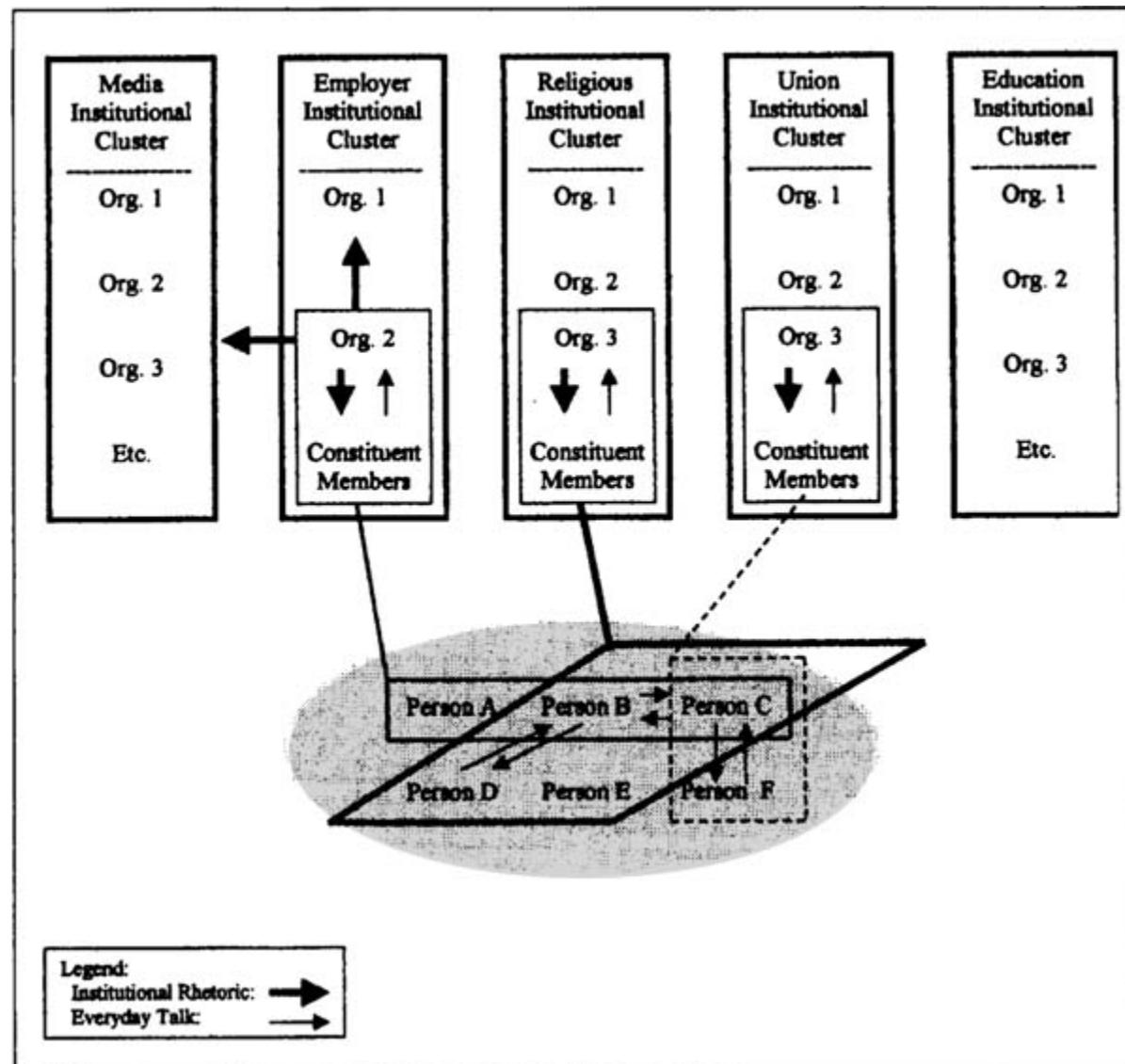
Discursive practices of institutional rhetoric are represented by the wide arrows in Figure 8.1. The model incorporates five exemplary institutional clusters—employing organizations, trade unions, media (journalism and popular culture), and educational institutions (primary, secondary, and higher education) and a cluster representing religious organizations—within which any number of specifically identifiable, relatively formal

organizations might operate. Other institutional clusters are also possible (e.g., public interest groups, charitable organizations, policy institutions, branches of government).

Because the point of institutional rhetoric in the sociopolitical context is the strategic advocacy of organizational interests, the thick, solid lines represent rhetorical linkages established by the discursive engagement of organizations with other entities within the overall sociopolitical context to promote what are taken as these organizations' sociopolitical interests. Content of these rhetorical relations is infinitely variable, as is the variety of media used to convey its arguments. Depending on the target of its institutional rhetoric, the organization advocating its position on a given topic might employ a wide range of media, for example, employee handbooks, advocacy advertising, or lobbying communication.

To trace all possible linkages within the model would be confusing and, perhaps, incomprehensible, so the representation in Figure 8.1 illustrates as an example some of the discursive links that might be established by the institutional rhetoric of employing organizations. Organization members represent a common audience for sociopolitically relevant institutional rhetoric. In the example of an employing organization expressing its collective interest on a specific sociopolitically relevant topic, employees are (obviously) the organization members that the arguments of institutional rhetoric are designed to reach. Organizations also direct the discourse of institutional rhetoric to other organizations within the same or different institutional clusters to advocate their sociopolitical interests. Thus, the example in Figure 8.1 also includes a plausible, hypothetical institutionally rhetorical linkage from an employer to other organizations in its own cluster as well as the institutional cluster of media.

Everyday Talk

Obviously very different from organizational discourse in the form of institutional rhetoric, organizational discourse as talk focuses on the everyday conversations shared among organization members and between organization members and important other people, such as family members. These discussions affect the subjective and intersubjective understandings characteristic of individuals and the collective. The scholarly literature in the field of organizational communication contains plentiful examples of interpretive theory and research (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983) that explore this type of organizational discourse. People talk about sociopolitical issues because often these affect life on an important personal level every single day. As organizational discourse, this talk helps individuals to both define themselves and negotiate relations with others. Thus, the discursive model of organizations and sociopolitical environments emphasizes the ways in which organization members use such talk creatively, to sort out and deal with the complexities of meaning and implications for human action of sociopolitical change.

Like the discourse of institutional rhetoric, organizational discourse as talk illustrates each of the main conceptual aspects of organizational discourse in the sociopolitical context. Social changes can transform the kinds of topics people discuss in organizations, the kinds of people they interact with, the meanings they hold. Yet individuals also influence the emergence of these meanings through their own discursive involvement

with other individuals. No single voice monopolizes the everyday talk surrounding issues of sociopolitical transformation. Rather, this conversation represents the various perspectives of a great number of parties variously interested in these changes. Finally, the conversation often becomes an argument as the voices, in their everyday talk, dispute over competing interpretations of the meaning and significance of sociopolitical change.

Though analytically distinct, the sociopolitically relevant discursive practices of everyday organizational talk are, in actuality, embedded within the larger context of institutional rhetoric. Thus, organizational discourse in the form of everyday talk appears along with the discursive practices of institutional rhetoric represented in Figure 8.1. Here the model employs thin arrows to symbolically represent individuals linked through talk to other people, in one or more organizations, in one or more of the institutional clusters contained in the model. The cluster of individuals (Persons A, B, C, etc. contained within the oval shape) below the institutional clusters represent the individuals who collectively comprise separate organizations within those clusters.

Organizational discourse as everyday talk functions primarily as individuals use this discourse to interpret and make sense of consequential sociopolitical change. Thus, in addition to the wide arrows that represent the context of institutional rhetoric within which individuals are embedded, thin solid arrows appearing in Figure 8.1 represent the interpersonal everyday talk that enables individual organization members to interpret the personal and collective meanings of transformation in the larger sociopolitical environment. The content of this talk, like the content of institutional rhetoric, is infinitely variable. The content of individuals' everyday talk about a given sociopolitical issue might involve, for instance, the simple expression of pleasure or frustration or perhaps instrumental talk, useful for problem solving and decision making. Specific patterns of within-and-across-organization conversational linkage, for any given person in any given temporal context, also can assume an infinite variety of forms. One employee's everyday talk about any number of sociopolitical topics might reflect, for example, that person's embeddedness in a social network based on church membership. In turn, the sociopolitically related everyday talk of another employee may occur within a context of that person's active involvement with other people in a civic or political group.

For purposes of clarity, Figure 8.1 illustrates one possible pattern of linkages based on the relations of everyday talk for a person with overlapping organizational identities as employee, trade union member, and church member. In this example, the individual with multiple organizational affiliations discursively spans the boundaries of these identifiably different organizational contexts, through the social practices of ordinary interpersonal interaction.

Organizational Discourse in the Contemporary Sociopolitical Environment

A concern with topics of sociopolitical relevance has become increasingly apparent in recent organizational research, and a discourse-centered conceptualization of organization-environment relations in the

sociopolitical context could productively inform much of this work. This section of the chapter applies the discursive model to two of these topics: sexual harassment and family-work conflict.

The number of specific topics that might be selected from the contemporary literature on sociopolitical issues and environments is large and wide ranging, and it would be impossible within the scope of a single chapter to provide an exhaustive survey of all the existing organizational research with sociopolitical relevance. The recent literature on the two topics examined here demonstrates especially clearly researchers' growing recognition of the mutuality of influence and effect between organizations, on the one hand, and the complex and often turbulent transformations taking place in the larger society, on the other. In other words, research on these topics demonstrates researchers' recognition that our society is in transition and organizations must deal with this while, at the same time, these organizations influence the directions such transitions take. But more important to its role exemplifying the discursive approach to organizations' sociopolitical relations, research on the topics of sexual harassment and family-work conflict (directly and indirectly) reflects both types of organizational discourse represented in the discursive model. Thus, these two issues have a special capacity to illustrate well how organizations' interaction within sociopolitical contexts can be more fruitfully understood from a perspective that makes organizational discourse analytically central.

Sexual Harassment

Scholars have recognized the important consequences of sexual harassment at least since Catherine MacKinnon's (1979) influential analysis of the legal and public policy debates centered around this issue. But concern over sexual harassment has grown dramatically since the early 1990s when, during his confirmation hearings, attorney Anita Hill accused Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of sexual harassment (Morrison, 1992; Ragan, 1996; Siegel, 1996). The body of research literature on the topic has now become substantial (Axelrod, 1993; Berryman-Fink, 1993; Braun, 1993; Brown, 1993; Clair, 1993a, 1993b, 1994; Clair, McGoun, & Spirek, 1993; Foegen, 1992; Galvin, 1993; Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990; Kreps, 1993; Strine, 1992; Taylor & Conrad, 1992; Terpstra & Baker, 1988, 1992; Wells & Kracher, 1993; Witteman, 1993). More specifically, organizational communication researchers have shown more interest in this topic than in most other sociopolitical issues, so the discursive model of organizations' sociopolitical communication processes readily applies to the topic of sexual harassment.

Research on Sexual Harassment: Evidence of Institutional Rhetoric

Organizational discourse as institutional rhetoric involves the strategic collective advocacy of what organizations take to represent their sociopolitical interests. Organizations direct their institutional rhetoric at other organizations, within the same or different institutional clusters, and also toward their own individual members. Examples of institutional rhetoric in the context of sexual harassment include policy statements on harassment contained in company handbooks and training programs, press and popular cultural narratives from people who have experienced harassment, and legal definitions of harassment as articulated in court decisions.

Some existing research on the topic of harassment has specifically investigated organizational communication phenomena, which this chapter would label as institutional rhetoric. This work can be organized into three primary categories: (a) studies that describe organizations' efforts to use institutional rhetoric for positioning themselves, normatively, on the topic of sexual harassment; (b) work that has concerned the institutional rhetoric of media organizations on the topic of sexual harassment; and (c) research that has incorporated institutional rhetoric as an explanatory variable predictive of harassment-relevant organizational outcomes.

The first cluster of research on the topic of sexual harassment has focused on the rhetoric of organizational responses to societal concerns about harassment. These discursive efforts represent institutional rhetoric as they serve to strategically position organizational actors within the context of normative opinion on this controversial topic. Clair's (1993a) study provides an example of research within this cluster (see also Gutek, 1996). Her research examined official communication on the topic of harassment among the Big 10 universities. As institutional rhetoric, this discourse was intended to publicly situate the universities sympathetically within the context of a serious social problem. Ironically, Clair found this institutional rhetoric instead functioned to commodify, bureaucratize, and privatize the practice of harassment within the organizations.

Institutional rhetoric may also strategically situate employers with regard to their employees through policy statements and training programs that concentrate on the topic of harassment (Berryman-Fink, 1993; Blakely, Blakely, & Moorman, 1998; Galvin, 1993; Hulin, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1996). Berryman-Fink describes organization-sponsored workshops and training programs in terms that the discursive model would call institutional rhetoric: collective statements of the normative positions that (a) harassment is not good, and (b) organizations bear some responsibility for reducing it. Berryman-Fink's research suggests that organizations can meet their obligations to discourage the undesirable practice of sexual harassment by promoting androgynous, "gender-flexible" communication among organization members. From a somewhat different perspective, Galvin's (1993) work explores the responsibility of academic organizations to clarify harassing statements and behavior for their faculties. Her research describes the discourse of institutional rhetoric in the sense that individual faculty members are not permitted to individually negotiate what statements and behaviors are considered to reflect sexual harassment. Rather, the institution determines which of these practices constitute harassment and then communicates these definitions to faculty members.

In the discursive model described in this chapter, media organizations represent a significant source of institutional rhetoric on practically any given sociopolitical topic, including sexual harassment. Institutional rhetoric functioning in this sense not only strategically positions media organizations in terms of their stance on a sociopolitical topic such as harassment but also contributes to the larger societal context of conversation and interpretation regarding such questions. Accordingly, a second group of studies has examined the harassment-related messages of mass media organizations. These messages represent institutional rhetoric in two ways. First, they strategically locate media organizations' own normative positions on the topic of harassment. Second, these messages also help to influence shifting interpretations of harassment within the

larger normative culture. As an example of research along these lines, Axelrod (1993) studied representations of organizational sexuality in film, focusing on the ways in which institutional rhetoric embedded in films can influence broader societal norms about harassment. Axelrod concluded that film treatments that present harassment as amusing, or as an acceptable means for women to achieve organizational influence, in effect persuade the audiences to adopt these normative positions too. Braun's (1993) case study of an advertising agency's costly response to charges of sexism in its campaigns also provides an example of research that has examined the institutional rhetoric of mass media discourse about sexual harassment. In this study, institutional rhetoric took one form in the offensive content of campaigns developed for agency clients, which seemed to advocate greater tolerance of harassing behaviors. Institutional rhetoric also appeared in the agency's defensive and hostile response to complaints about these campaigns. Scornfully counterattacking its critics rather than listening and thoughtfully responding to them, the agency communicated its normative position on harassment in a misguided use of institutional rhetoric that angered agency critics and cost the agency both clients and income.

A third group of studies has implicitly identified institutional rhetoric as an explanation for the outcomes of harassment-related decision-making processes. For example, Wells and Kracher (1993) consider organizations' moral duty to define *hostile environment* not from an organizational point of view, but from the perspective of its (usually female) targets. These authors argue that if organizations can adopt in their own institutional rhetoric the voice of the women who most frequently experience sexual harassment, they can thereby better accomplish the overriding moral purpose of meeting the needs of those who have been harassed. Terpstra and Baker's (1988, 1992) research also demonstrates how institutional rhetoric may influence decision making in the context of sexual harassment. These studies examined the grounds associated with legal decisions favorable to harassment claimants. In this instance, institutional rhetoric is represented by the courts' articulation of criteria for determining that sexual harassment has occurred. Terpstra and Baker identified some of these criteria, including the severity of the harassing behavior, the presence of witnesses and documents, the notification of employers by harassment targets, and the remedial actions taken by companies in response to internal complaints. Outcomes affected by these criteria are tangible and significant. They include the determination itself that harassment has occurred, as well as decisions regarding the compensation awarded to its targets and the punishment dealt to its perpetrators.

Research on Sexual Harassment: Evidence of Everyday Talk

As the discursive model suggests, sociopolitical organizational discourse in the form of everyday talk is analytically distinct, but actually embedded within a context of institutional rhetoric. Everyday talk does not focus on the advocacy of strategic collective interests. Instead, people use everyday talk in a much more personal way, creatively employing this form of discourse to help sort out and deal with the everyday human complexities that sociopolitical controversy and change imply. Everyday talk occurs among the members of a single organization, and also involves personal relationships that cross organizational boundaries. The private, personal stories of harassment told to friends, family members, therapists, lawyers, support groups, and other potential helpers provide an example of sociopolitical discourse as everyday talk. A very different

type of everyday talk about sexual harassment occurred during the Hill-Thomas hearings, when innumerable intraorganizational conversations sparked by the proceedings helped organization members to make sense of this controversial subject.

Research on the topic of sexual harassment has frequently focused on organizational discourse as everyday talk. This literature is represented by two clusters: (a) a group of studies that has examined everyday talk about sexual harassment as it has occurred in the form of personal harassment narratives, and (b) research that has focused on everyday talk in the form of ordinary interpersonal interaction among organization members.

Research analyzing personal narratives of harassment represents one cluster of studies examining everyday talk on the subject of sexual harassment. These narratives represent everyday talk in the sense that they are personal forms of expression, used both to recount and make sense of experiences that might represent sexual harassment. These narratives reflect everyday talk both influenced by the larger discursive context of institutional rhetoric about sexual harassment and also potentially capable of influencing it.

Among the number of studies that have examined sexual harassment from the perspective of personal narrative, Strine (1992) analyzed a series of personal harassment stories from a critical poststructuralist perspective. In this case, the everyday talk contained in her informants' narratives allowed Strine to detect means by which the individual, organizational, and social meanings of harassment are discursively constructed through everyday talk in organizations. In effect, everyday organizational talk privileges harassers' views of the severity and significance of their behavior and preserves a dominant patriarchal organizational order. Taylor and Conrad (1992) analyzed the same collection of harassment narratives. Like Strine, they identified the essentially political ways in which everyday talk about harassment respectively privileges and marginalizes organization members on gender grounds. Taylor and Conrad maintain that everyday talk about harassment systematically favors the interpretations given by perpetrators, usually men, and thereby reinforces existing patterns of male domination in the organizational setting. Brown (1993) used a somewhat different approach to explore the consequences of everyday talk, as personal narrative, for the construction of organizational meanings on the subject of sexual harassment. Based on actual interviews, Brown's "creative narrative" depicted a fictional conversation among female conference attendees. By relating their personal experiences with sexual harassment, these women were able to make sense of such incidents and discover creative means for dealing with them. Finally, Clair's (1993b) research also analyzed personal narrative to explore the role of women's everyday talk that reinforces more pervasive organizational understandings concerning harassment. Participants in Clair's research recounted incidents of harassment. These narrative accounts occasionally showed evidence of resistance by the women. More commonly, though, the narratives reflected the women's use of rhetorical framing devices to make sense of harassment in ways primarily unchallenging to dominant organizational ideology.

A second group of studies has examined interpersonal communication, which, as taken-for-granted, commonplace interaction among members of organizations, represents the discourse of everyday talk. For example, Clair et al. (1993) developed a typology of women's interpersonal responses to harassment.

Forms of response in this typology range from the most passive, such as avoidance, to such aggressive responses as direct confrontation. As varieties of interpersonal interaction, these communicated responses to harassment represent the discursive domain of everyday talk. Witteman (1993) analyzed interactional characteristics common to the phenomena of sexual harassment and organizational romance, respectively, as well as the features of interaction that distinguish them. In this sense, Witteman's research explores interpersonal interaction as everyday discourse. Witteman considers such everyday talk as complimentary comments and looks to represent communication behaviors common to both sexual harassment and organizational romance. Analyses showed that nonreciprocated self-disclosure illustrates everyday talk more likely to be interpreted as harassment than as normal relational discourse. Similarly, Solomon and Williams (1997) have distinguished the communication characteristics of harassment as opposed to flirtation behavior. Gutek et al.'s (1990) research also features everyday talk as it influences collective meanings relevant to the topic of sexual harassment. These researchers found that greater sexualization of the workplace produced a higher level of harassing behavior. Significantly for the purposes of this chapter, the researchers employed a discursive measure of workplace sexualization, operationalized as the degree of ongoing everyday communication between women and men. More simply put, the greater the level of everyday between-sex talk, the greater the incidence of workplace sexual harassment. Finally, Foegen (1992) also concentrated on interpersonal communication as a reflection of everyday organizational talk about sexual harassment. In Foegen's research, everyday talk emerged in the form of organizational discussions specifically on the topic of sexual harassment. These discussions eventually resulted in greater discomfort and interpersonal conflict in subsequent interactions among organization members.

Interpenetration of Institutional Rhetoric and Everyday Talk

Organizational discourse at the levels of institutional rhetoric and everyday talk each has unique significance. Yet, and more important, these discourses interact with and mutually influence each other. For the sociopolitical example of sexual harassment, such discursive interpenetration might work in the following ways.

Though always subject to contestation and negotiation, the social practices of institutional rhetoric generate a societal context of meaning around sociopolitical questions such as sexual harassment (e.g., Mumby & Clair, 1997). This context represents the rhetorical voices of diverse collective interests with differing views on these issues. For example, positions advocated by institutional rhetoric might center on the very definition of harassment and whether it includes such behaviors as complimenting coworkers' appearance. In this example, social discourse, as institutional rhetoric, establishes what behaviors and communicative practices constitute harassment, whether these definitions represent widely consensual understandings, aggressively contested ones, or something in between. Thus, institutional rhetoric may contribute to the normative understanding that all commentary on the appearance of coworkers is inappropriate and, therefore, represents harassment.

Another example of the institutional rhetoric of sexual harassment might focus on responsibility for it. Assignment of responsibility might label perpetrators as wrongdoers, or on the other hand, just victims

of confusion over changing social standards. In this sense, institutional rhetoric contributes to normative understandings about who should get the blame when harassment occurs. Thus, the discourse of institutional rhetoric might help to create a climate of sociopolitical meaning in which behaviors that offend other people are excused. In such a climate, people whose joking focuses on sexual topics or who use diminutive terms in communication with coworkers evade sanction because they "meant no harm."

Within the context of meaning generated through institutional rhetoric, individuals use everyday discourse to comprehend and interpret sociopolitical questions such as sexual harassment. These individuals generate meanings that may be complicit with or oppose certain positions expressed through institutional rhetoric. Two examples illustrate how discursive practices of everyday talk might play out within the contexts of institutional rhetoric about what constitutes harassment and whose responsibility it is.

In the first example, institutional rhetoric establishes a social context for defining what types of behaviors constitute harassment. Embedded in this normative context, discourse as everyday talk reflects and responds to these definitions. Thus, within a discursively influenced normative climate that classifies comments on personal appearance as inappropriate or offensive, a group of female coworkers discussing the supervisor's compliments may interpret these not as innocent pleasantries but instead as sexual harassment.

In the second example, institutional rhetoric establishes sociopolitical expectations regarding the question of responsibility for sexual harassment. Again, sociopolitically relevant organizational discourse in the form of everyday talk takes place within this context of normative meaning. Thus, when an organization's normative atmosphere dictates that responsibility for harassment is based not on the content of a message but on its (harmful) intent, older male employees may interpret their own communication as politeness rather than harassment. These men might accordingly continue to address young female employees using diminutive labels such as "honey" or "missy" or "sweetie." In turn, the women might employ everyday talk to express their objections to these terms.

Clair's (1994) study represents a rare example of research that has explored the intersecting discourses of institutional rhetoric and everyday talk. In this research, the target of a well-publicized harassment incident simulates the discourse of everyday talk in the form of interviews with the researcher, during which the research respondent interprets newspaper accounts—defined by the discursive model as institutional rhetoric —of the incident.

Family-Work Conflict

Ongoing redefinition of American families has come to represent a topic of increasing societal concern. Accordingly, the interest of organizational researchers in the subject of family-work conflict has also grown (Adams, 1993; Bandow, 1991; Covin & Brush, 1993; Crosby, 1991; Falkenberg & Monachello, 1990; Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1992; Goodstein, 1994; Karambayya & Reilly, 1992; Lilly, Pitt-Catsouphes, & Googins, 1997; Lobel, 1991; Lobel & St. Clair, 1992; Mele, 1989; Miller, Stead, & Pereira, 1991; Pitt-Catsouphes & Googins, 1999; Schneer & Reitman, 1993; Williams & Alliger, 1994). Communication research specifically has

not shown as much interest in this topic as in the question of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, the existing research on family-work conflict indirectly reflects concern with discursive variables and processes.

Research on Family-Work Conflict: Evidence of Institutional Rhetoric

Institutional rhetoric reflects the perspective of organizations, advocating their interests within the larger sociopolitical environment. One example of institutional rhetoric on the topic of family-work conflict might involve the promotion by organizations of their family-oriented benefits. Organizations' public arguments addressing legislation relevant to workers with families represent another illustration of the institutional rhetoric of family and work.

The literature on family-work conflict demonstrates extensive evidence of a concern with organizational features that resemble institutional rhetoric. This literature has included research concentrating on three primary themes: (a) specific arguments for and against progressive family and work policies, as these have been articulated through institutional rhetoric; (b) the identification of institutional rhetoric as a primary explanatory variable predicting organizations' responsiveness to their employees' family-related needs and expectations; and (c) the consequences, for individuals and families, of the emergent "mommy-track" and "daddy-track" phenomena, widely recognized contemporary terms largely constructed through the discursive processes of institutional rhetoric.

The public articulation of organizations' support of and opposition to progressive family and work policies reflects an important expression of institutional rhetoric that scholars have explored. Several investigators have examined the arguments used in the institutional rhetoric of the advocates of these progressive programs. In one such essay, Adams (1993) articulates common arguments made by organizations that employ institutional rhetoric strategically to position themselves as advocates for families. One such argument suggests that the morale benefits of these policies outweigh their costs. Another makes the point that supporting families is crucial to the long-term well-being of the whole society, business organizations included. Similarly, Mele (1989) analyzed the normative argument, expressed through institutional rhetoric, that organizations bear an ethical obligation to support the marital and parental responsibilities of their employees.

Scholars have also explored the logic evident in the institutional rhetoric of organizations that oppose progressive family-and-work policies. Adams (1993) identifies several of these arguments, which suggest that progressive family policies violate employee privacy, create perceptions of unfairness among employees (e.g., Young, 1999), unreasonably raise employee expectations, and pose excessive costs of regulatory compliance and liability. Bandow (1991) also examined the logic of opposition to progressive family policies as this has been articulated through institutional rhetoric. One such discursive theme maintains that more generous family benefits promote an economically detrimental ethic of entitlement among employees. Bandow also describes the rhetorically expressed logic that progressive family policies actually discriminate against married women and women with families, who earn less due to their family commitments.

Institutional rhetoric explains the responsiveness of organizations to their employees' family-related needs

in a second category of research on the institutional rhetoric of family-work conflict. Consistent with this framework, Goodstein (1994) found that individual organizations respond strategically to external institutional pressures for their greater involvement in work and family issues (Witkowski, 1999), as these are communicated through institutional rhetoric. Organizations that experience more outside pressure to accommodate workers' family obligations do so. Organizations not facing such rhetorically expressed external expectations do little to assist with their employees' family obligations.

Institutional rhetoric has contributed to the discursive construction of meaning through its creation of such terms as the *mommy track* and its more contemporary parallel, the *daddy track.* These terms refer to the career patterns of women and men, respectively, who voluntarily choose to give their families priority over their work. Institutional rhetoric in this case has been articulated most obviously by media organizations, which have speculated on the practical consequences of these terms for the employees described by them. Findings from research have produced inconsistent conclusions about these effects. On the one hand, Lobel and St. Clair (1992) found that mommy-track and daddy-track workers with significant family commitments jeopardize their own compensation and opportunities for advancement. On the other hand, Schneer and Reitman (1993) discovered no apparent negative consequences for these workers, finding the earnings of men and women from "nontraditional" mommy-track and daddy-track families similar to those of their counterparts in "traditional" ones.

Research on Family-Work Conflict: Evidence of Everyday Talk

In addition to institutional rhetoric, the discursive model includes sociopolitically relevant organizational discourse in the form of everyday talk. Researchers of family-work conflict have not yet investigated questions that might be translated directly into the terminology of the discursive model. But these researchers have explored topics that indirectly suggest a potentially important explanatory role for sociopolitically relevant organizational discourse in the form of everyday talk. This literature includes three clusters: (a) studies that have described differing perceptions regarding family-work conflict among members of various organizational classes, which might reflect their different patterns of everyday talk; (b) research that has examined the significance of family-work conflict for patterns of everyday interaction among family members; and (c) research that has explored the constructive uses of everyday talk as people adapt creatively to the tensions sometimes produced when family and work demands collide.

A first group of studies has investigated differing perceptions regarding the nature and extent of family-work tension among various organizational subgroups. This research has not concentrated directly on discourse, or indeed, on any type of communication at all. Yet although these studies simply group respondents according to demographic or organizational role, the discursive model would suggest that these different categories actually imply diverse discursive experience, which could explain different views of family-work conflict. In other words, the overall everyday discursive pattern for workers with responsibility for children will naturally include some people and topics that childless workers would not ordinarily discuss. In turn, these variant discursive patterns could result in differing interpretations of the significance of family-work conflict. For example, Covin and Brush (1993) found significant differences between students and human

resource professionals in their perceptions of issues such as support for child care, parental responsibility, work commitment, and the impact of children on achievement motivation. Covin and Brush did not directly examine the communication patterns of their respondents. Nevertheless, the discursive model would propose that the typically dissimilar everyday discursive experience of these two groups merits investigation as a factor influencing their diverse perceptions of family-work conflict. Falkenberg and Monachello (1990) proposed the presence of subgroups among dual-earner households, based on such factors as the spouses' individual reasons for working, the responsibilities assumed by spouses in the home, and the spouses' sex, which significantly affect the nature of problems experienced by families. The discursive model suggests that membership in these subgroups implies different patterns of everyday talk. These diverse discursive patterns in turn affect the variety of family and work problems that Falkenberg and Monachello observed. A final study (Miller et al., 1991) within this cluster of research explored different perceptions of top managers and employees, respectively, concerning employees' dependent care obligations. These researchers found two significant perceptual divergences between members of these two organizational subgroups. First, while employees considered family obligations to affect job performance, top managers did not. Second, while employees considered employers to have some responsibility to assist their employees in their family care obligations, top managers did not. Again, the discursive model would explore these differences in terms of the varied discursive experiences of everyday talk that underlie them.

A discourse-based strategy would also reinterpret a second group of recent studies that has focused on consequences of family-work conflict outside the workplace. The discourse-based model incorporates everyday talk across organizational boundaries. Accordingly, research in this group suggests that everyday talk at home, as well as everyday talk at work, plays an important role in the social dynamics of family-work conflict. One study within this cluster of research (Karambayya & Reilly, 1992) discovered that women's role repertoire has expanded disproportionately compared with men's as a result of family-work conflicts. Further, the study found that women restructure their time more often than men do to meet family commitments. In discursive terms, these findings suggest that family-work conflict may have created a more expansive pattern of women's everyday talk in comparison to men's because women's lives appear still to demand greater social role flexibility than do men's. In contrast, Williams and Alliger (1994) found the discursive consequences of family-work conflict similar for women and men. However, their research reports pervasive feelings of tension and negative "mood spillover" between family and work, and vice versa, regardless of sex. A discursive perspective would logically extend the examination of these feelings by concentrating on the ways in which women's and men's everyday talk both reflects and contributes to it. Everyday talk about family-work conflict also affected both men and women in Frone et al.'s (1992) study. Both male and female respondents reported greater intrusion of work-related demands into family life than of family-related obligations into work. The discursive implications of such findings might indicate that the nature of everyday talk at home will be more disrupted when work-related expectations increase. By comparison, patterns of everyday talk at work might be predictably less affected by family demands.

A final development in research on families and work has relevance in the context of the discursive perspective. This work has begun to explore the constructive outcomes people experience as they use

everyday talk to help themselves adapt to the tensions of competition between these two contexts. Crosby (1991), a primary exemplar of research within this group, suggests that people who juggle work and family responsibilities may experience stress and difficulty but also the immense satisfaction of a more complex and satisfying, competent personal identity. Investigation of the creative uses of everyday talk both to accomplish and reveal personally productive outcomes represents a relevant application of the discursive model. Another study, by Karambayya and Reilly (1992), surveyed both partners in a set of dual-earner couples. Despite pressures of role expansion and work restructuring, couples with greater family involvement reported higher marital satisfaction and lower stress. In discursive terms, these findings may imply the positive potential of a more complex discursive environment that includes everyday talk in both work and family contexts. Finally, Lobel (1991) focused on individuals' relative investment in work and family roles. Lobel maintained that the typical assumption of negative role conflict obscures the more significant capacity of individuals to enact a self-identity in which work and family roles both represent important elements. Like those of other researchers reviewed in this section, Lobel's perspective also has discursive implications. In this instance, everyday talk reflects not an inevitable tension between work and family. Rather, everyday talk serves as the constructive means by which individuals find personal and social meaning as they discursively negotiate their family and work involvement.

Interpenetration of Institutional Rhetoric and Everyday Talk

Organizational discourse on the issue of family-work conflict demonstrates the discursive interpenetration of institutional rhetoric and everyday talk. Some examples illustrate how these processes of mutual influence might occur.

As for other sociopolitical issues, institutional rhetoric on the topic of family-work conflict serves to construct a societal context of meaning, composed of a variety of often competing rhetorical positions. For example, in the case of family-work conflict, the positions advocated by institutional rhetoric might focus on fairness in the development of solutions to the tension of competing family and work obligations. One such rhetorical view of fairness might suggest that organizations should more generously accommodate their employees' family commitments to compensate them for the societally significant responsibilities of childrearing and caretaking of the elderly. Yet, while such a normative inclination might prevail at any given time, the discourse of institutional rhetoric will also articulate competing logics of fairness as well. Such an alternative norm for fairness might argue, for example, that individuals who choose commitments to both work and family should take personal responsibility for the resulting extra strain on personal resources. In an alternative normative view, fairness might demand equality of treatment among employees regardless of differences in their personal lives.

The institutional rhetoric of family-work conflict might center on another normative question, the welfare of children. One position on this issue might argue that young children are permanently damaged when their mothers work outside the home. A competing view might emphasize the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of a quality day care experience. Again, the discursive model predicts that one of these positions, expressed as institutional rhetoric, may dominate sociopolitical understanding at some times. At others, there

may exist little consensus, and perhaps great social division, over which argument is "right."

Everyday discourse concerning the question of family-work conflict occurs within this larger societal context of meaning constructed largely through institutional rhetoric. In other words, institutional rhetoric establishes the positions in the larger sociopolitical discussion that various interests hold. Individuals variously attend to the arguments advanced through these rhetorical expressions, discuss them, interpret their significance, and act and speak in ways that either sustain or contradict certain positions articulated by this institutional rhetoric.

Examples suggest possible ways in which the discourse of everyday talk interacts with institutional rhetoric on the topic of family-work conflict, specifically the rhetoric that addresses questions of fairness and the welfare of children. In the first example, institutional rhetoric sets up the normative context for defining fairness relative to the sociopolitical issue of family-work conflict. In this example, a hypothetically dominant, rhetorically articulated normative perspective suggests that fairness is best served when employers make allowances for their employees' family obligations. Within this normative environment occur the discursive processes of everyday talk. Such everyday talk might challenge rather than accept norm-based accommodation of employees' family commitments. Thus, a group of single, childless employees may complain of the unfairness inherent when employees with families enjoy what others see as special, non-merit-based consideration. In the second example, institutional rhetoric about family-work conflict focused on the welfare of children. This discourse might argue that good day care programs actively benefit children. Within this rhetorically generated discursive field, individuals' everyday talk communicates a parallel concern with the well-being of children. Thus, parents who can visit their children at an on-site corporate day care facility enjoy a still rare (but increasingly common) form of everyday talk in their interaction with their children during the workday. More confident of their children's well-being through this proximity, the parents may also find everyday talk with their coworkers more satisfying and productive.

Summary

This chapter dealt with a topic relatively novel in organizational communication analysis, focusing on the interactions of organizations in the context of their sociopolitical environments. The thinking presented here was inspired by Weick's notion of the "enacted environment" and Taylor's conceptualization of organizational "conversation" within an environmental context. Based on these ideas, the chapter proposed a model of organizational communication with sociopolitical environments in terms of the intersecting organizational discourses of institutional rhetoric and everyday talk. The chapter illustrated this model using the contemporary sociopolitical issues of sexual harassment and family-work conflict.

A concern with sociopolitical questions equally involves both the consequences of sociopolitical transformation for organizations and the implications of organizational practices for the larger culture. Such a focus is far from established within the field of organizational communication. But its continued development offers many exciting possibilities for organizational communication analysts compelled by the purpose of better understanding the larger societal significance of organizational discourse.

Note

1. In recent years, researchers have shown demonstrable enthusiasm for the three primary theoretical approaches to organization-environment relations, including studies based on *population ecology* (Barnett, 1990; Boeker, 1991, 1997; Castrogiovanni, 1991; Gimeno, Folta, Cooper, & Woo, 1997; Greve, 1999; Swaminathan & Delacroix, 1991; Tucker, Singh, & Meinhard, 1990; Wholey & Sanchez, 1991), *resource dependence* (Baker, 1990; Boeker & Goodstein, 1991; Davis, 1991; Galaskiewicz & Wasserman, 1989; Goodstein & Boeker, 1991; Kraatz, 1998; Lang & Lockhart, 1990; Mizruchi, 1989, 1992; Mizruchi & Galaskiewicz, 1993; Mizruchi & Steams, 1988; Oliver, 1991; Perrucci & Lewis, 1989; Singh & Harianto, 1989; Wade, O'Reilly, & Chandratat, 1990); and *institutional* (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Abrahamson & Rosenkopf, 1993; Baum & Oliver, 1991; D'Annuo, Sutton, & Price, 1991; DiMaggio, 1988; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Elsbach & Sutton, 1992; Finet, 1993, 1994a, 1994b; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Judge & Zeithaml, 1992; Leblebici, Salancik, & Copay, 1991; Mezias, 1990; Oliver, 1991; Tucker et al., 1990) perspectives.

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