Communication Theory in the Ombuds Context: A Resource for Practitioners

JOSHUA CANZONA

ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the organizational ombuds toolkit for reflection and practice by canvasing and assessing the usefulness of several theories within the discipline of communication studies. The theories are organized using a tripartite framework based on significant themes in ombuds practice: (1) Organizations and Organizing (2) Uncertainty and (3) Power Relationships. Emerging from daily practice, these themes represent the experience of office visitors who find themselves approaching the ombuds because they are navigating uncertainty across the landscape of an organization shaped by a variety of power structures. After the introduction of each theme, included theories will be described individually prior to suggestions for application in the ombuds context using brief case studies. The goal is to help ombuds practitioners think of themselves as both conflict management specialists and communication specialists as well.

The formation and daily work of organizational ombuds is interdisciplinary. While the organizational ombuds role is often closely associated with a background in alternative dispute resolution or conflict management, these areas are themselves interdisciplinary and do not exhaust the range of applicable resources. This paper contributes to the organizational ombuds toolkit for reflection and practice by canvasing and assessing the usefulness of several theories within the discipline of communication studies. The goal is to help ombuds practitioners think of themselves as both conflict management specialists and communication specialists as well.

The title "organizational ombuds" refers specifically to professionals practicing to the four ethical principles established by the International Ombuds Association (2023):

> An organizational ombuds operates in a manner to preserve the confidentiality of those seeking services, maintains a neutral/impartial position with respect to the concerns raised, works at an informal level of the organizational system (compared to more formal channels that are available), and is independent of formal organizational structures.

Organizational ombuds provide a protected space where members of their constituency (i.e., visitors) can share challenges and feel heard and understood. The ombuds will listen carefully to the visitor narrative, work to frame the key issues, help to articulate and prioritize goals, and explore options for next steps. Ombuds sometimes facilitate difficult conversations for two or more parties and also raise systemic issues within an organization when appropriate.

The relevance of communication theory to ombuds should not be surprising since much of our work involves assessing and improving the quality of communication within organizations across a variety of scales and contexts. "Effective communication is the key to constructive conflict engagement," advises Bernard Mayer (2012, p. 182). Pruitt and Rubin define conflict as "a perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously" (1986, p. 5). There is optimism and dynamism in this definition. There is room for movement in its language: perceived, belief, current, simultaneously. But this is movement requiring communication, a workable understanding of what has been communicated already and the capacity to communicate effectively about different visions for the future.

Communication is not only a key aspect of organizational life; it is part of the human condition. "Scholars in the discipline of communication see communication as the organizing element of human life. In other words, communication constitutes reality" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 5). The study of communication theory can help us to better understand and describe the organizations we serve. To use terminology from the Certified Organizational Ombuds Practitioner (CO-OP®) Job Domains (2016), communication theory can improve "case management," "ombudsman actions," and our capacity to "know the organization." Ombuds have a unique vantage point within the organizations they serve. Theory is the lens we apply when surveying the landscape to identify key patterns and insights.

Amidst their own lengthy definition of the ombuds role, Katherine Greenwood and Thomas Kosakowski at the University of Southern California describe themselves as "communication coaches" who can help "in exploring various communication strategies" (2019). In her 2021-2022 Annual Report, Daniela Brancaforte, Main Campus Student Ombuds at Georgetown University, lists "improving communication" as part of her office mission (2022, p. 5) and names "improving communication among parties" as part of the "countless and unsung 'wins' for the year" (2022, p. 4). Conceptually, attentiveness to communication also reveals how organizations develop and promulgate a sense of identity and norms throughout their membership. Whether we reflect on our own communication with visitors, on coaching interventions designed to help visitors improve their communication with others, or on the ways in which the study of communication enhances our understanding of organizational formation, successful organizational ombuds practice is closely bound up with thoughtfulness and skill in communication.

The communication theories examined in this paper were selected after careful deliberation on their relevance and practical usefulness to my own practice as associate ombuds at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Taking a similar project designed for healthcare providers as inspiration (Bylund et. al., 2012), this paper is likewise attempting to balance description of theories with discussion of their potential application for the benefit of busy practitioners. Selected theories will be described primarily through reference to *Theories of Human Communication*, 12th Edition (Littlejohn et. al., 2021) and with reference to scholarship in conflict studies as appropriate. The theories will be organized using a tripartite framework based on significant themes in ombuds practice: (1) Organizations and Organizing (2) Uncertainty and (3) Power Relationships. Emerging from my daily experience as a practitioner, these themes represent the experience of office visitors who find themselves approaching the ombuds because they are navigating uncertainty across the landscape of an organization shaped by a variety of power structures. After the introduction of each theme, included theories will be described individually prior to suggestions for application in the ombuds context using brief case studies.

THEORIES OF ORGANIZATIONS AND ORGANIZING

There is a significant amount of scholarship produced each year examining "the role of communication in organizing and structuring the work of organizations" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 299). "Organizational Communication" is, therefore, an extant disciplinary subfield of interest to ombuds with relevance comparable to inquiries into "Organizational Conflict." Better understanding how communication shapes and moves within organizations is helpful across the three broad categories of ombuds work identified by Charles Howard: (1) communications and outreach (2) issue resolution and (3) supporting issue prevention and systemic change (2010). Ombuds need to understand how to communicate the role of their office and its consistency with the values of the organization. Workshops and training activities designed to improve organizational capacity for managing conflict along with other needed skills are also enhanced through understanding how organizations communicate complementary development priorities. In issue resolution, many visitor concerns can be best addressed through opening, accessing, or shifting communication approaches and channels. The pursuit of systemic change is one of the most challenging aspects of ombuds practice, and this too is enhanced by understanding how communication theory assists the analysis and advancement of systemic issues. This section will first examine the Structuration/Four Flows Model and then the Montréal School. Both are frameworks providing insight into how communication forms organizations and how communication moves within organizations across multiple dimensions or practices.

STRUCTURATION/FOUR FLOWS MODEL

Grounded in the structuration theory developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens, the Four Flows Model examines how "communication constitutes organizations" (Iverson et. al., 2022, p.75). The model identifies four multidirectional communication flows that "collectively perform key organizational functions and distinguish organizations from less formal social groups" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 304). These are (1) membership negotiation, (2) reflexive self-structuring, (3) activity coordination and (4) institutional positioning. The word "flows" captures the fluid and variable nature of communication through these activities. Membership negotiation is communication establishing individuals, often new members, within an organization. Reflexive self-structuring is communication setting out formal structures, operations, and resource allocation within an organization. The development of a mission statement or organizational chart are both examples of reflexive self-structuring. Activity coordination is communication developing work roles and collaborative relationships. On the larger scale, institutional positioning involves public relations and communicating the place of the organization with respect to other institutions and society generally. Ombuds have a responsibility to help visitors during daily case work and a responsibility to continually learn their organizations. Reflecting on the Four Flows Model and how these communication events interact to form and reform an organization can provide vital

organizational knowledge (McPhee & Zaug, p. 588). Organizations are not a thing; they are a process. Ombuds benefit from any framework helping them to better recognize this reality.

FOUR FLOWS MODEL IN PRACTICE

Kevin is a relatively new employee and approaches the ombuds office with challenges spanning the entirety of his nine months on the job. Visibly frustrated, he provides a long narrative wherein his organization expects him to master multiple computer programs and processes without sufficient hands-on training. "The expectations are out of control," he says, and then he further describes how multiple parties assign him new tasks at the last minute. Unmoored and pulled in completely different directions at the same time, it is not at all clear that Kevin will be able to keep his job.

Facing a story like this, the ombuds responsibility includes reframing the problem in a way that brings clarity and additional insight. The ombuds wants to help the visitor state their challenges and their goals in a way that feels authentic with respect to their experience. Bernard Mayer explains, "Reframing is an essential part of a constructive communication process. It occurs naturally, but it is also an area in which intentional efforts make a difference" (2012, p. 210). In this case, the ombuds could guide the visitor in examining the narrative using the four flows. What did Kevin experience during his initial membership negotiation with the organization? Conversation points could include discussion of the mechanics of the onboarding process generally and the ways in which Kevin understood his relationship with and purpose within the organization from day one. This flows easily into a conversation concerning reflexive self-structuring and how Kevin has received communication concerning the mission, structures, and hierarchies within the organization. Given the scattered and unpredictable nature of Kevin's daily responsibilities, it may be that he needs communication more clearly establishing his place within the whole. These processes lead to conversation around activity coordination where the relationship between purpose, work roles, and collaboration can be analyzed and assessed. While each of these three flows are related, they are also analytically separable in a way that can help the visitor to better transform a narrative into a new understanding of distinct challenges. Given that it applies to the status of the entire organization in society, institutional positioning may seem less applicable to visitor concerns. Nevertheless, it may be that Kevin absorbed institutional communication on this level before and during his own tenure as an employee. The perceived level of consistency between how an institution communicates itself to the world at large versus how it is experienced from within can be a source of distress for visitors.

MONTRÉAL SCHOOL

Both the Four Flows Model described above and the work of communication scholars forming the Montréal School are concerned with the communicative constitution of organization, i.e., they are considering how communication creates the organization in an ongoing process. The approach of the Montréal School examines how actors translate ideas, purpose, and meaning through five organizational levels. These levels are: (1) a network of practices and conversations (2) mapping collective action (3) authoring the organization through textualization (4) representation and presentification and (5) one back into many.

At the first level, two people interact concerning a common issue in a process of "co-orientation" characterized by their respective "worldviews" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 307). The idea of "worldview" is extremely important for ombuds work since consultations often include thinking through challenging situations from the perspective of others. Anyone working in conflict management is well aware that two parties can see one situation completely differently based on their own needs, presumptions, and vantage point. Assessing the fraught negotiations during the Branch Davidian crisis in Waco, scholar Jayne Docherty describes a failure of "worldviewing" as a much more serious and intractable problem than organizational challenges. She writes, "I

discovered a worldmaking narrative that is blind to the existence of worldviewing. This particular worldmaking narrative dominates our culture, and it is the cornerstone of an intolerant, judgmental approach to any group that refuses to name the world in keeping with mainstream values, ontological commitments, and categories" (2001, p. 275). If this concept of worldview seems too vast or somehow philosophically distant to properly apply in specific ombuds cases, then we can alternatively use the word "frame" to describe "more limited, specific fragments of experience." At any scale, it is important to remember "a common characteristic of worlds (and to some extent frames too) is the non-reflective, uncritical acceptance of the basic assumptions on which they lie" (Nudler, 1990, p. 178). It is the business of ombuds to help visitors examine non-reflective, uncritical assumptions.

If the individuals are able to achieve co-orientation of worldview, they can begin mapping collective action while connecting with increasingly large networks. Initially small interactions can produce results far into the future and across an entire organization. The Montréal School uses the term "distanciation" to describe this phenomenon. Borrowed from Paul Ricœur, "distanciation" refers to the separation between discourse and its origins. As distanciation increases, an idea or practice expressed in one-on-one conversation might be further translated into policy or other formal statements. This is the third stage of authoring the organization through textualization. The new text is now fixed and disassociated from the intention and meaning available in the original, spoken discourse (Taylor et. al., 1996, p. 24). As ombuds are well aware, the original intent of a policy can be opaque. Once such texts are authored, they are then used in the fourth stage for the representation and presentatification of the institution. From here, the representation of the organization, particularly its textual representation in policy or mission, will influence daily practice as the one is translated back into the many.

Understanding this cycle of translation and some of its specialized vocabulary can be useful for ombuds. For example, despite their informal role, ombuds are sometimes described as a "change agent" within an organization (Wagner, M., 2000). The cycle of organizational communication and translation described by the Montréal School is useful in this regard. Whether an ombuds is helping a visitor in exploring their own agency in creating change or creating change themselves through raising systemic concerns, it is important to develop a holistic picture of how ideas are translated into policy and practice at different levels.

MONTRÉAL SCHOOL IN PRACTICE

Susan is a longtime employee with a specialization in financial management who reaches out to the ombuds with specific concerns about the way the annual budget process is handled in her division. Each year, budget priorities and a single deadline are communicated from organizational leadership. In response, Susan expects to receive draft budget documents from numerous subunits within her field of responsibility but not directly within her chain of command. She can ask for the documents, but she cannot personally compel their delivery. Susan explains, "Every single time we do this, I either receive corrections or entire first-draft documents just days before my own report is due. I inevitably work all night during budget week, and I always feel like the final product is compromised." When asked about her goal, Susan makes it clear she wants a systemic solution, but she does not know how to best communicate her concerns and advocate for change.

There can be no change unless you convince others with power there is a problem. Using the language of the Montréal School, Susan could consider how to approach others, perhaps supervisors who are in the chain of command above individual units, and appeal to their worldview in a way that allows for a process of co-orientation toward a common challenge. In short, Susan might begin thinking about a way to translate her concerns in a way others can understand by first considering their perspective. In the case of the budget, it may be managers

themselves find the deadlines nearly impossible to meet based on when they receive institutional priorities. Given Susan's long history with the organization, she may be especially well equipped to see the challenge from different angles when prompted. From here, Susan could envision each successive stage of translation from mapping collective action to the actual development of policies allowing for an extended and more collaborative budget process better reflecting how the organization chooses to represent itself. Perhaps prior processes of distanciation removed budget policy from needs on the ground, and this is part of the argument for reconsideration. Moving from the one back to the many, finding her own agency through this cycle of translation could help Susan deliver positive change across multiple units and divisions. Equipped with Montréal School vocabulary and an understanding of the multi-layered translation forming their organization, the ombuds will be better positioned to help Susan envision and think through her options.

THEORIES CONCERNING UNCERTAINTY

Helping visitors manage uncertainty is a key element of ombuds service. When visitors seek out the ombuds for thought partnership or guidance concerning organizational resources, they are seeking a way to address uncertainty. This is an expectation for ombuds, and several ombuds offices describe themselves with the line, "where to go when you don't know where to go" (Anonymous, 2021, p. 12). Visitors may need help clarifying their priorities and identifying next steps. They may find themselves in a formal investigation or disciplinary action without a clear understanding of either process or potential outcomes. As noted in the discussion of organizational theory above, visitors can approach an ombuds for help while wrestling with their role and sense of purpose within an institution, and the ombuds is tasked with thinking through the challenges of uncertainty and whether communication can make a difference. This section will first examine Karl Weick's Theory of Organizing, which is concerned with uncertainty reduction at the organizational level, and then Motivated Information Management, which is a theory concerned with the impact of uncertainty on individuals.

KARL WEICK'S THEORY OF ORGANIZING

This theory bridges our previous discussion of organizational theory with reflection on uncertainty. In fact, Weick imagines organizing as an exercise in sense-making; organizing is meant to reduce uncertainty. He uses the word "equivocality" "to describe the uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and lack of predictability of information" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 300). Organizations benefit from the reduction or removal of equivocality through a three-part process of enactment, selection, and retention. Enactment is the identification of equivocality. It is the act of identifying and "bracketing" a particular issue to focus on. Selection is the process of sifting out the most relevant information to further define and address the situation. Retention is the act of reintegrating useful information into broader organizational knowledge. For example, in a healthcare setting, "enactment processes are used to make sense of different health related challenges, selection processes are used to choose different courses of action in response to these challenges, and retention processes are used to preserve what was learned from enactment and selection processes for guiding future health care/promotion activities" (Kreps, 2009, p. 348). Once through the retention process, organizational actors reach a "choice point" where they might reexamine equivocality and adjust bracketing to tackle additional issues. Organizations often engage in these uncertainty-reduction activities through cycles or routines, e.g., regular meetings where participants have an opportunity to communicate with each other.

WEICK'S THEORY OF ORGANIZING IN PRACTICE

Omar and Ashleigh begin a meeting with the ombuds by describing frustrations with inertia and ongoing logistical problems in a School of Health Sciences where they each have multiple roles as faculty, researchers, and practicing clinicians in a large division. Ashleigh says, "My support

staff in both the classroom and clinical settings are all over the place. They are being taught different standards when they rotate around with my colleagues, and I cannot rely on any baseline level of knowledge when I am providing them instruction or requesting their help during the workday. I am doing so many things by myself that I should not have to do." Omar adds, "I agree with everything she is saying, and it feels like the situation is worse every year. It isn't fair to anyone."

Weick's theory first provides ombuds with a useful way of thinking through organizing as an exercise in uncertainty reduction. Disorganization in this scenario has generated considerable uncertainty for Ashleigh and Omar. They never seem to know exactly what they can and ought to expect from their staff colleagues, and this means their own workload and daily flow of activities is perpetually in flux. Whether Weick's theory is explicitly introduced or not, the ombuds could walk the visitors through a process of enactment, selection, and retention. While the visitors may have a wide spectrum of frustrations, they appear willing to bracket the problem of variability in knowledge and practice across support staff. Through selection, they could then decide to focus on staff orientation and training. In the retention phase, this could lead to integrating new information and operational guidelines into the division as a whole. At the small scale of the ombuds meeting, the visitors could think through this cycle on their own in tentative fashion. They might then identify a need to engage in a larger cycle of routine meetings to address equivocality around issues of training and practice throughout their division. Eventually this could lead to decision points where broader issues of hiring practice or ongoing mentorship are considered along with the initial changes to staff training. The key here is that the ombuds is able to frame the visitor concerns in terms of uncertainty and conceptually discuss cycles of communication wherein organizations pursue uncertainty reduction. As always, it will be up to the visitors to decide whether this approach rings true and seems applicable to their concerns.

MOTIVATED INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

Motivated information management examines the relationship between uncertainty and information seeking behaviors along interpersonal channels. Given the prevalence of uncertainty around medical care, the theory "has been applied to a variety of health topics, including organ donation, sexual health, and end-of-life care" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 371). Individuals face significant uncertainty in the workplace as well. For example, an employee might approach their supervisor for a formative performance review prior to the end of an evaluative cycle to reduce anxiety around the outcome. Theory authors Walid Afifi and Judith Weiner focus on interpersonal channels for information gathering (e.g., talking to a trusted colleague rather than browsing the Internet) and emphasize the immediacy and interactivity of such communication (Afifi & Weiner, 2004, p. 170). Ombuds will recognize this as the potential need for a visitor to weigh the benefits of an anxiety-inducing conversation versus the sustainability of continuing uncertainty.

The theory outlines three stages of information seeking and avoidance prior to reaching a decision on the next course of action. The three stages are: interpretation, uncertainty discrepancy, and evaluation. During interpretation, an individual weighs their current level of uncertainty against their desired level of certainty/uncertainty. A large "uncertainty discrepancy" between the current and desired levels can produce considerable anxiety. The subsequent evaluation phase includes outcome assessment and efficacy assessment. Outcome assessment involves weighing the risks and benefits of information seeking. Efficacy assessment refers to whether or not an individual can employ an information seeking strategy successfully. If we imagine approaching a supervisor with a difficult question, efficacy assessment can be further drilled down. There is communication efficacy (are you able to pursue the conversation successfully), target efficacy (whether the supervisor is able and willing to share the needed information), and coping efficacy (can you handle the information/answer sought). In the last phase, the decision phase, an individual then decides whether to seek the information or avoid

the issue. It should be noted, avoidance in this case comes after the deliberative process described above. Ombuds often put the option of "taking no action" on the table for visitors, but this is a thoughtful choice rather than the complete avoidance of deliberation on a concern.

MOTIVATED INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

Audibly upset, Michelle calls the ombuds office to request a same-day appointment as soon as possible. Three hours later, she sits down with the ombuds and says, "I have cooled down a little since this morning. I got some bad news, and I just don't understand what happened." Michelle then explains how she has been promised a path to a senior director role in her division since her hire date five years prior. In the last two months, such a role finally opened up in the organization that aligned almost perfectly with her skills and work experience. Michelle was strongly encouraged to apply for the position, and she discovered she was the only internal candidate as the hiring process unfolded. Just before Michelle called the ombuds, she was informed the hiring committee decided to go with an external candidate with qualifications "more closely matching the needs and priorities of the division." She says, "I don't understand what was wrong with my candidacy, and I have no clue if this organization is invested in my future at all. They probably just hope I'll quit at this point."

Applying motivated information management in this scenario involves framing the concern(s) as grappling with uncertainty. Michelle is facing several unknowns about her skills, her future, and whether she is still valued within the organization. The uncertainty discrepancy has led to enormous anxiety and speculation about how others might negatively perceive her contributions to the organization. At one point the ombuds suggests, "It might be the only way to answer some of your questions is to ask them." Michelle then enters an evaluation phase where she first considers a conversation concerning the senior director position she wanted. She tells the ombuds she wants to ask, "Why didn't I get this job when I'm more than qualified for it," but she is afraid she will look like a sore loser and further harm her reputation. After some discussion and coaching around the topic of communication efficacy, however, Michelle decides to reframe the conversation to focus on seeking needed information while improving her candidacy for the next promotion opportunity. Entering a decision phase, the ombuds asks, "Is it possible you could leave this and just do nothing at all?" Michelle responds that the conversation seems less risky to her now and that the anxiety of not knowing more about her place within the organization is not sustainable. She hopes this will be a foundation for additional discussion of and support for her future development and advancement. At each step of this deliberation, the ombuds was able to use motivated information management theory to help the visitor clarify exactly which challenge she was trying to think her way through and why.

THEORIES CONCERNING POWER AND CONTROL

Many of the most charged and intractable challenges brought to an ombuds involve power differentials (Dale et. al., 2008, p. 13). An "inherently social variable," power is a measure of asymmetric control according to Galinsky et al. They write, "In any given interaction, one party has more control over and access to some resource that can range from material goods, services, and currency to more intangible elements such as information or affection" (Galinsky et al., 2012, pp. 17-18). Weighing risk versus the sustainability of a given situation while considering one's own agency and access to the varied conduits of power is a complex process. The support of an ombuds equipped to reflect on power within their organization from a range of perspectives can be a valuable asset. Understanding how power and control are developed and communicated within organizations is critical for helping visitors effectively parse and examine challenging situations, and it is essential when weighing options for next steps. Bernard Mayer advises, "Instead of thinking that people need an equivalence of power or equality of power, we might more usefully think that people need an adequate basis of power to participate effectively in conflict. They require enough power that others must at least consider their concerns and enough

power to resist any solution that fundamentally violates their interests" (2012, p. 69). The two theories below, Concertive Control and Discourse of Suspicion, are helpful for better understanding how power operates, and by extension, they are helpful for better understanding the means of access to power and resistance as well. Describing his work, Michel Foucault explains, "What I am trying to do is to approach this extremely important and tangled phenomenon in our society, the exercise of power, with the most reflective, and I would say prudent attitude" (Bess, 1988, p. 12). We should do the same.

CONCERTIVE CONTROL

Communication scholar James Barker identifies four types of control within organizations: (1) simple, (2) technological, (3) bureaucratic, and (4) concertive. Simple control is direct from an authority figure. This is the control exercised when the boss or supervisor tells an employee what they need to do. Technological control in the contemporary workplace often involves the use of computers to monitor employee performance. An organization might employ software to ensure tasks are completed by a certain date or even directly track employee time spent typing on their laptop. Bureaucratic control is the realm of hierarchy and policy. The stacks of now-digital forms used in an annual performance review process are an example of the reward and punishment mechanisms at work in this type of control. Being able to help a visitor further parse their work experiences by differentiating among simple, technological, and bureaucratic control is already immediately helpful when "framing the issue" during ombuds consultations. Barker, however, is especially interested in the concertive control of self-managed teams.

Concertive control "results from worker consensus, or workers working in concert to develop normative rules to guide their behavior. The rules are based on values established by the workers themselves and what they believe is important for achieving the tasks assigned to them" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 267). For Barker, concertive control is closely connected to the idea of "generative discipline." Generative discipline holds that organizations develop values around what makes work sensible, rational, and important. Rules and practices are then developed within the organization on the basis of these values. Barker describes the development of generative discipline within a self-managed team using three stages: (1) development of shared understanding concerning values and rules (2) development of normative rules within the team to monitor each other and (3) stabilization of rules and penalties. This sense of identity and ownership within the team can lead to both productivity and difficulty, "This is a potential dilemma of self-managed teams: team members get to create a work structure and climate that they want, and yet their commitment encourages them to 'over control'" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 268).

CONCERTIVE CONTROL IN PRACTICE

Louis is a facilities technician and HVAC specialist with responsibility for the physical plant operated by a large organization, but he has contacted the ombuds to discuss his role in staff governance. Each year employees across the organization elect representatives to a staff council tasked with representing and advocating for worker interests in a variety of forums. Louis says, "This is my ninth year serving as part of the staff council. Most of my previous work had to do with running charity events like 5K runs and canned food drives. But this year they put me on the executive committee for the whole council." Louis goes on to describe how the executive committee is a 6-member group elected by the staff council to handle its leadership responsibilities. He says a lot of members stay in the role for years, and they seem to work on "council stuff" all the time with emails at night and on weekends with prompt replies expected. Louis continues, "I will get three emails in the same thread on a Sunday, and then on Monday the vice chair of the council will follow it up at 9am upset that I haven't replied yet. My job has me on my feet all day, and I don't even get in front of a work computer until after lunch usually."

As a new member on the executive committee, Louis entered a team with an established culture of concertive control. The expectations concerning workload were well known among the executive committee veterans who had been present at the first stage of generative discipline, but these expectations were not explicitly communicated to Louis, who joined after the rules were stabilized. In addition to the lack of upfront transparency about norms, it is not surprising the expectations were stridently enforced. James Barker makes this clear in his foundational article on the phenomenon of concertive control, "The irony . . . is that, instead of loosening, the iron cage of rule-based rational control, as Max Weber called it, actually became tighter" (1993, p. 408). But a more binding set of rules need not be unexamined. With knowledge of this theory, the ombuds is better equipped to help Louis reflect on the ways in which control has been formed and communicated within the team. Louis might consider whether his election to the committee could be a transition point allowing the members to revisit their shared understanding and values in a new context.

DISCOURSE OF SUSPICION

As its name indicates, this theory is characterized by a questioning posture toward organizations and the power structures within. Derived, in part, from Paul Ricœur's "hermeneutic of suspicion," this theory does not passively accept surface-level explanations concerning an organization's values and functions. From Ricœur's perspective, this suspicious stance draws on the work of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche who shared a common intention in "the decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as 'false' consciousness'" (Ricœur, 1970, 33). Suspicion, therefore, is the effort to reveal philosophies and architectures hidden underneath a text or, for our purposes, an organization. Bringing this critical tradition to communication studies, scholar Dennis Mumby's work "calls for an attitude of questioning about and an examination of the deep structure of ideology, power, and control within organizations" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 318-319). One important insight is that organizations are not neutral—they are not a given. Meaning within the organization is dynamic and contested. Different groups exercise power in pursuit of their preferred outcomes.

A second insight involves the existence and operation of hegemony within organizations. Adapted from the work of Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is the means whereby a group maintains power. It is the narrative or belief system serving the interests of power, often with the consent of the disenfranchised. Some organizations might ritually reinforce stories supporting the idea that all of the personnel are "part of a family." While potentially benign, this ideology can authorize leadership to expect or demand uncompensated sacrifices from the workforce just as members of a family might call on each other for aid. For Dennis Mumby, the discourse of suspicion is a kind of lens revealing the complex interplay of control and resistance within organizations. Hegemony on these terms is not just an extension of organizational leadership, "but rather processes of power arrangements that emerge through ongoing construction by the many individuals and groups involved" (Littlejohn et. al., 2021, p. 320). A discourse of suspicion can, therefore, lead to a deeper understanding of power within the organization and to a greater capacity for transformation beginning with the shared creation of meaning across a wide range of stakeholders beyond hierarchical leadership.

DISCOURSE OF SUSPICION IN PRACTICE

Understanding the discourse of suspicion can help an ombuds to better understand the nature of organizations generally, and it can help when guiding visitors toward asking the right questions when clarifying their goals, strategies, and agency. Keisha reaches out to the ombuds office with an email expressing frustrations about what she perceives as an inequitable workload in her department. During a phone call with the ombuds, she says, "My immediate colleagues and I are all performing support roles in a large department responsible for managing client accounts. We work in the office more than forty hours a week on everything from travel arrangements to

complex technical processes involved in keeping the accounts up to date. The worst problem is that we are increasingly asked to organize and then attend what are essentially social functions for the clients on evenings and weekends." When asked about these obligations, Keisha explains how she and her colleagues are really attending just in case something goes wrong with logistics, and they otherwise do not have much of a role. Meanwhile, some of the higher-ranking account managers routinely rotate attendance at the events since they do not always work directly with the attending clients. Keisha continues, "The division manager is always telling us to bring problems to her directly, but she has something like three hundred people working for her. I tried to mention workload to her once during an event, and she said it is all part of paying dues and being a team player. It really does not feel like I am part of a team here. It is more like hazing or something at this point."

Fostering a revolution is not part of the ombuds role. Helping Keisha think through the ways power is communicated and accessed within her division could be helpful, however. One issue raised in her narrative is that she has not previously felt heard when sharing concerns about workload. While seemingly communicating a commitment to transparency and access, the division manager has her own obligations preventing due consideration and intervention on most problems brought to her in ad hoc fashion. In the same way, language about being a "team player" can obscure inequities and prevent meaningful deliberation on needed change. The language of "teams" and "teamwork" can be used to open up conversations, but it can also be used to completely shut them down. When asked if she has any allies in this situation, Keisha says that her immediate colleagues and her direct supervisor are sympathetic to the unfairness of the expanding schedule. When asked about how changes usually seem to be made in the division, she then describes how weekly and monthly planning meetings among senior staff seem to produce a lot of action items. Perhaps Keisha could work with colleagues to bring their concerns and some possible solutions to this space. Digging beneath the surface of the division to peel back obstructive narratives and reflect on the conduits of power within could lead to new strategies for the visitor. The discourse of suspicion is not necessarily about burning everything to the ground. It is, instead, a way of understanding the landscape before attempting to navigate through challenging situations.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out three goals for improving organizational ombuds practice by: (1) helping ombuds to think of themselves as communication specialists as well as conflict management specialists (2) providing a toolkit of communication theories directly applicable in ombuds practice and (3) organizing the provided theories in a typology reflecting patterns and concerns emerging from ombuds service to visitors. Ombuds already identify the importance of effective communication when describing their work. This is not surprising since communication is integral to how we understand and approach conflict situations. Bernard Mayer explains, "We engage in conflict through communication processes that are direct and indirect, purposeful and accidental, verbal and nonverbal, symbolic and concrete, interactive and unidirectional" (2012, p. 182). In my own practice, I often hear the lamentation, "We cannot communicate. We need to fix our communication." In canvasing the theories above, this paper provides some insight into the basics of effective or improved communication across a variety of contexts. But at a deeper level, this paper also engages with theories examining communication as a fundamental aspect of the human experience. Communication is how we make sense of the world and our place in it. Communication is how organizations speak themselves into existence, and it is through the deeper analysis of communication that the outlines of conflict and other challenging situations can become clear. The study of communication does not culminate in a list of tips to provide a visitor, even though such lists are often useful. Instead, the study of communication provides the necessary scaffolding to see problems and potential interventions with enhanced clarity.

The six theories reviewed in this paper were selected on the basis of their relevance and usefulness in the daily work of ombuds. The developed typology of theories concerning "organizations and organizing," "uncertainty," and "power" is intended to accurately reflect the concerns and experiences of ombuds visitors. Visitors find themselves in organizational contexts often characterized by complexity and opacity. Visitors are experiencing some uncertainty concerning their status within the organization, the parameters of the challenges they are facing, or possibilities for next steps. In every instance, both the challenges and possibilities are shaped by power, and the visitors are also reflecting on the risks posed by power and the opportunities present in their own agency.

The theories above can be used as lenses for examining the organizations we serve, and the challenges described in our offices. Asking questions is a significant part of the ombuds role, and we are obligated to ask questions of ourselves as well. The value of a theory is in its explanatory power. Is it good to think with? Can it improve the quality of reflection on our work? Here we find schemas for outlining the formation and renegotiation of organizations as dynamic exercises in communication rather than static entities. We find uncertainty itself and potential responses examined as multistage processes allowing us to better parse needs and actions in a variety of circumstances. And we find the conduits of power, both apparent and subtle, explained in a way that allows for deeper analysis and the identification of new strategies for change. Whether in our own ruminations or as frameworks that can be directly applied during conversations with visitors, the goal is to think of these theories as a toolkit. These theories do not explain everything, and they are not perfect representations of reality. Map is not territory. But if you find one or more theories useful in navigating a particular challenge during a particular moment in your ombuds practice, then this exercise has met its mark.

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AUTHOR BIO

Josh Canzona is Associate Ombuds at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a constituency encompassing more than 40,000 community members. He holds a PhD in religious studies from Georgetown University and additional graduate degrees in conflict resolution, education, and social science. His research and teaching focus primarily on pluralism, diversity, and interreligious dialogue with work experience in universities, high-need public schools, and online education for refugees. (canzona@unc.edu)