

LAY THEORY, COMMUNICATION, AND ORGANIZING:
A STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY'S OFFICE OF
SUSTAINABILITY

by

Brenden E. Kendall

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STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The dissertation of Brenden E. Kendall
has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

George Cheney, Chair 05/05/2011
Date Approved

Connie Bullis, Member 05/05/2011
Date Approved

Julia Corbett, Member 05/05/2011
Date Approved

Danielle Endres, Member 05/05/2011
Date Approved

Bam Dev Sharda, Member 05/05/2011
Date Approved

and by Ann Darling, Chair of
the Department of Communication

and by Charles A Wight, Dean of The Graduate School.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a qualitative case study of organizing for sustainability, which is an ambiguous term that has been part of public discussion of environmental issues since at least 1987. A growing number of organizations employ sustainability officers responsible for communicating with internal and external audiences. Since this sort of work is becoming more common, scholarship investigating the intersections of sustainability, organizing, and communication is needed.

This study followed the development of an office of sustainability at a large U.S. public university from the fall of 2007 to the spring of 2010. The author engaged in long-term participant observation, conducted 20 in-depth individual interviews, and two group interviews with employees and partners of the office of sustainability. This study's research questions focus upon lay theories of communication, organizing, and persuasion.

The author develops a uniquely interpretive approach to reconstructing and assessing lay theories of communication. Employing this analytic framework, the author addresses participants' lay theorizing of intraorganizational advocacy, voice, and communication ethics. Findings show that study participants navigate at least three tensions when cultivating a collective environmental voice on campus, and theorize communication in ways that discourage or disparage overt influence and the direct engagement of communication ethics in discussions about sustainability. The study demonstrates the value of inquiry into sustainability advocates' metacommunication in addition to their communication strategies and practices.

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving and inspiring parents,
Mark and Roseann Kendall.

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PREFACE

In this preface, I offer a brief introduction to the study. I begin with a discussion of the project's origins. Following that, I provide a short description of the Office of Sustainability (OS) at the heart of this case study.¹ I conclude the chapter with an explanation of some of the motivations that brought me to and have carried me through this project.

Origins of This Study

In the summer of 2007, a colleague told me about “a really great research opportunity.” She said that a university had provisionally approved the formation of an Office of Sustainability. The Office would begin its work during the fall 2007 semester. My colleague was familiar with the man who was to serve as Director of this new organization, and she suggested that he would appreciate a researcher following the development of the Office. I emailed him, indicating that I was a doctoral student with a particular interest in environmental organizing. In early July, I met him for lunch on Intermountain West University's (IWU) campus.² He expressed enthusiasm about my participation as a researcher during the early stages of the Office's development.

Snyder would act as director quarter-time for at least the first semester. The Office had only one other staff member as of July 2007, Lillian Valmer, a recent graduate of IWU. As I describe in Chapter 2, she was a key player in the movement to establish an Office of Sustainability on campus. Valmer worked for 1 year with the OS thanks to a grant provided by a local philanthropic organization. Later in the summer,

Robin Carson was hired as the Office's first full-time employee and given the title Sustainability Coordinator.

One week after I met him, Snyder invited me to attend the meeting of the Office's ad-hoc steering committee. In an email on July 10, 2007, he wrote to me: "I plan to introduce you as a graduate student from communication interested in observing the way that the OS network evolves." At that meeting, participants congratulated one another on the launch of the OS and Snyder, Valmer, and a few others talked about their earlier briefing of IWU administrators on plans for the Office's pilot year. Snyder was excited after that first meeting. "That's a good group of people, huh?" he asked me. With a broad smile, he said, "We're really going to change this thing."

My advisor, Dr. George Cheney, and I were excited about the prospect of a research project following the emergence of an organization devoted to sustainability. I began informally working with Snyder, Valmer, Carson, and other volunteers in July 2007. During August and September of that year, I assessed the feasibility of an ethnographic research project. I submitted an application for Institutional Review Board coverage of a study using participant-observation research methods and an "action research" perspective (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985), and I received approval for formal research activity with the OS in October 2007.

A Brief Introduction to the Case: An Office of Sustainability

This project took shape as a long-term case study of an environmental organization working within and upon a larger institutional system. In this section, I provide a broad and brief sketch of the Office and IUW. I offer a more detailed description of the OS in Chapter 2.

The OS is part of a large university in the U.S. Intermountain West. Between July 2007 and July 2008, the OS operated under probationary status within IUW. On Earth Day 2008, IWU administrators announced their intention to establish the OS as a “permanent feature of IUW” during a press conference. Since July 2007, the OS has had, at most, three full-time staff members. Between July 2007 and July 2009, the individuals acting as the Office’s Director worked part-time, according to pay and personnel records. That said, the Office’s first director, Russell Snyder, frequently worked hours well beyond those expected of a full-time employee. Snyder also worked as a researcher and teacher at IWU. The employees of the OS do sometimes work long and irregular hours, and in day-to-day talk they note how their commitment to sustainability bridges (and blurs) their work and personal lives.

It is difficult to define who is a “member” of the Office of Sustainability, and perhaps it is misleading to use that term. The OS presently has three paid and full-time staff members—a Director, a Sustainability Coordinator, and an Outreach and Education Coordinator—plus one part-time Grant Coordinator. During each academic semester, the Office benefits from the contributions of a varying number of interns and student employees with “work-study” arrangements. From the beginning, a host of University faculty and staff have been intensively involved in the organization’s operations. Additionally, there have been a small number of graduate students, such as myself, who have conducted research projects with, on behalf of, or about the OS for coursework or thesis/dissertation projects. Finally, as the Office broadened and intensified its communication campaigns, Office staff consulted with and relied upon an increasing number and variety of IWU administrators, staff members, and student group

representatives. I will call individuals working with or alongside the OS *volunteers* and *partners*. Some campus organizations, such as IUW's library system, have developed internal "green teams;" OS employees have worked from the beginning to foster and support these groups. Thus, while the Office employs a small number of people, it maintains a complex and changing network of relationships on campus.

The Office of Sustainability is charged with, among other things, coordinating sustainability communication on campus. It has a public "strategic plan" that lists three specific functions of the OS: connect, collaborate, communicate. As such, the Office is an organization particularly attuned to and reflective about its communicative action. Additionally, Office staff members maintain a loosely coupled organic network within the encompassing university system (Morgan, 2006; Weick, 1976). This means that their work is in large part *organizing* and, by their own definition, *communicating*. Thus, the Office of Sustainability is an ideal case for the study of communication *about* communication, organizing, and environmental issues.³

Motivations

In many ways, this dissertation project emerged out of opportunity and happenstance. Nevertheless, I was motivated to work on this project by a set of longstanding ethical and professional commitments. There are several personal motivations that contributed to my decision to carry out this project: (1) my identification as an environmentalist, (2) my interest in people's attempts to self-organize because of environmental and ethical issues, and (3) the immediacy of sustainability issues in the western United States and Great Basin.

I am an environmentalist. It can mean many things to take on that identity (Corbett, 2006). For me, being an environmentalist means understanding one's identity with specific and enduring reference to the extra-human world—to be *in communication with* it, if you will (see Peterson, Peterson, & Grant, 2004). One of the clearest articulations of such a perspective is Aldo Leopold's (1949) development of a land ethic in *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold explains that, "In short, a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his [or her] fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such" (p. 204).

I believe that there is *no ideal or pure form of* environmentalism. Instead, I believe that in pursuing the meanings of nature human beings ought to "transgress the borders of one's own self [... to reflect] on the situation that defines one's subjectivity or the forces of domination that define one's being" (Spoelstra, 2007, p. 301). Symbolic processes establish subjectivity and relations between people, as well as between people and the extra-human world. This case involves people who wrestle with environmentalist identities and who do "environmental work" but must negotiate what that means in a particular context.

As well, I have had a long-standing interest in the ways in which people attempt to self-organize. I have studied citizen involvement in municipal sustainability groups, local currency networks, consumer activism, and such. The Office of Sustainability provided me an engaging and complex case of creative organizing for environmental, organizational, and social change. In the pages to come, I explore the ways in which these

environmental organizers conceptualized and talked about *communication*, and how that affected their work.

The concept of sustainability is consequential for the places I called home while I conducted this study: Salt Lake City, Utah, the Great Basin, the Rocky Mountains, and the Colorado Plateau. Recent research suggests that climate changes in the American Southwest will be significant in the coming decades (U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2009). For instance, high alpine ecosystems like those of the Wasatch and Uinta mountain ranges are at great risk due to projected rises in average temperature. Down in the valleys along the Wasatch Front, dangerous levels of air pollution are a chronic problem, and unabated population growth may exacerbate toxic conditions in the area. What's more, most of Utah's human population is dependent upon "dirty" energy fuels and technologies (especially coal), while opportunities for "clean" energy development (e.g., solar, wind, geothermal) abound. Contention over the disposal of radioactive waste in the state is perennial and likely to continue, given the popularity of plans to mitigate climate change by augmenting nuclear energy production. It is the complexity and multiplicity of these sorts of issues that are, for me, inherent to life in Utah. Thus, I jumped at the opportunity to conduct research with an emerging Office of Sustainability at a prominent university in the Intermountain West.

Finally, I am writing this some time after Russell Snyder's death in November 2008. He died while on a hike in a national park that he loved very much. His death, my personal response, and the great uncertainty his passing brought for everyone involved with the Office reminded me of the remarkable and dynamic nature of research

relationships. I am indebted to Snyder and the many other participants in this study. I hope that this project honors their work.

Acknowledgements

In *This is Water*, David Foster Wallace (2009) writes: “The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able to truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day” (p 120). Without the attention, care, and sacrifice of so many people, I would not have had the freedom to devote myself to this study and write this dissertation. The following people, and many others, generously afforded me the freedom to pursue this part of my life’s work.

My parents, Roseann and Mark Kendall, to whom this project is dedicated, are my steadfast supporters, invaluable benefactors, and dear friends. Without you, I could not have accomplished any of this. Thank you. I am also deeply grateful to my brother, Grant Kendall, my partner in conversation as we grow and develop our knowledge of the world together.

I want to thank the members of my doctoral committee, Dr. George Cheney, Dr. Connie Bullis, Dr. Julia Corbett, Dr. Danielle Endres, and Dr. Bam Dev Sharda. As well, I thank Dr. Karen Ashcraft, who served on my committee during her time at the University of Utah. In the classroom and beyond, these six people have had an immeasurable effect on my intellectual growth and success during my time as a doctoral student. These six people have made possible the interesting, challenging, and fulfilling life path on which I am now.

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I received professional, helpful assistance on this project from a great many staff members at the University of Utah. Among them were Corrinne Lewis, Jennifer Duignan, and Jessica Tanner of the Department of Communication, and Carol Bergstrom of the Graduate School. As well, faculty members of the Department of Communication who did not sit on my committee, among them Dr. Ann Darling and Dr. Glen Feighery, went out of their way to be supportive and kind to me all along. I now work at Clemson University and I am thankful for my colleagues' support. Finally, thanks are also due to Dr. Glade Ellingson, Sheldon Thieszen, and Elisabeth Lilja.

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I also want to acknowledge all of the people at Intermountain West University who participated in this study. You were generous with your time and willingness to collaborate with me. I cannot name you here, but please know that I am profoundly appreciative of your dedicated participation in this study, at IWU, and in the movement for a sustainable society.

Finally, I want to thank my mentor and the chair of my committee, Dr. George Cheney. I first took a class from George in the fall of 2001, when I was an undergraduate sophomore at the University of Montana. In the decade since then, George has been my teacher, advisor, and friend. George, I am indebted to you for your patient, sagacious, and creative work with me. You have served as a model for and cornerstone of my growth as an intellectual and professional. This project is yours in many ways, as well. Thank you for your part in it. I look forward to our continued work together.

Thank you to you all.

Notes

¹ I will frequently use “the Office” and “the OS” instead of the Office of Sustainability.

² The name of the university and names of all research participants are pseudonyms.

³ In this study, I will frequently use the terms *environment* and *environmental*. Unless otherwise noted, I use these terms to describe the natural world—ecosystems, ecologies, and the like. For the most part, I do *not* use the term environment in the way many organization theorists do—that is, as a label for a population of organizations. As well, I want to acknowledge that calling anything “natural” is selective, political, and historically grounded (Sturgeon, 2009). Yes, making distinctions between the environment and society is reductionistic and problematic (Cronon, 1996). Still, I will use these terms, making sure to note the multiple meanings of language about the natural world at play in this case.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of *organizing for sustainability*. Sustainability is a widely recognized, though ambiguous and contested, term. There are, of course, competing definitions of what it means for people, organizations, and societies to be(come) sustainable. In this study, I use that word to talk about the struggle over human organizations' and societies' relationships to the natural world over the long term. Some people question whether sustainability is a necessary goal, as well as whether its pursuit impedes the attainment of goals that are supposedly more worthwhile (e.g., economic growth; see e.g., Lomborg, 2001, 2007). If nothing else, the struggle over the term presents scholars and laypersons alike with interesting philosophical and practical problems. As my work on the project progressed, I refined my focus to address *communication about communication* in this case of organizing for sustainability.¹

Research Purposes

I designed this study and report according to three guiding purposes. These purposes took shape over the course of a research process in which I identified and selected questions and problems *in cooperation with research participants* after a period of joint work and reflection (Heron, 1996). Taken together, these purposes explain why this study is a valuable investigation of a case of organizational change connected to

environmental discourse, lay theorizing about communication, and values-related rhetoric.

First Purpose

My first aim is to present a detailed case study of organizational change related to environmental communication. There are now a number of books and reports on organizational (and individual) change vis-à-vis the goal of ecological sustainability. Many of these volumes rely heavily upon heroic narratives about triumphant and persistent individuals, as well as dynamic organizations (e.g., Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999; Nattrass & Altomare, 2002; Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, & Schley, 2008; SustainAbility, 2008). In a growing number of confessional tales, business leaders recount their personal and organizational encounter with the idea of sustainability, persuading others that such a *conversion* is necessary and a business advantage (e.g., Anderson, 1998, 2009; Chouinard, 2006). There are now a slew of well marketed frameworks and programs for organizations undertaking sustainability-related change, including the natural capitalism approach promoted by the Rocky Mountain Institute (see Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999), the organizational learning approach made famous by management guru Peter Senge and promoted by the Society for Organizational Learning (see Senge, Laur, Schley, & Smith, 2006), the natural step approach established by Karl-Henrik Robèrt (see Nattrass & Altomare, 2001; Robèrt, 1997, 2008), the community-based social marketing approach developed by Doug McKenzie-Mohr (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999), and more. However, it is an open question as to whether this discursive trend is a mere fad or indicative of a more enduring, widespread, and thoroughgoing change in thinking about organizations

(Abrahamson, 1991; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Barley & Kunda, 1992; Zorn & Collins, 2007). Indeed, scholars of communication have offered numerous examples of the ways in which sustainability and sustainable development discourse has been used to defend the status quo and limit the scope of change (Ganesh, 2007; Livesey, 2002; Livesey & Kearins, 2002; Peterson, 1997; Torgerson, 1995).

As an ambiguous master-concept for organizations, as well as for citizens and nations, sustainability deserves investigation and critique. More importantly, the frameworks, heroic narratives, and pop culture artifacts that make up the so-called sustainability “trend,” “revolution,” or “ideology” are not the final word on how to *do* sustainability. Instead, these are representative of a discourse through which particular kinds of knowledge about the world is created (Fairclough, 1992; Foucault, 1980; Livesey, 2002). As people participate in these discourses, they borrow from, manipulate, and add to the set of symbolic and material practices that make up “sustainable-ness.” There is a complex, nonlinear, reciprocal relationship between the work of people on the ground and the figure of sustainability as a social myth (De Geus, 2002). As such, a detailed communication-centered case study of sustainability organizing can speak to the intersections of organizational and social change in the interest of the natural world.

Second Purpose

This study is designed to examine and explain multiple lay theories of (1) communication and organization/organizing. In particular, I track and interpret research participants’ lay theorizing about *persuasive* communication in the interest of organizational *change*—and thus, by extension and orientation, social change. My advisor, Dr. George Cheney, first suggested that the dissertation’s theoretical focus

could be implicit theories of communication. He and I regularly discussed my fieldwork, and he observed that, based upon my early participant observation, communication was both a primary function of and significant concern for the Office of Sustainability.

In this dissertation, I develop a uniquely *interpretive* approach to lay theory and theorizing. Past work on the subject has been overwhelmingly (but understandably) guided by the assumptions of cognitivism. The approach developed in this dissertation will enable scholars of organizational communication to move beyond the currently predominant techniques used to study lay theories of communication, including the analysis of cultural codes, metaphors, and message design logics (e.g., Baxter, 1993; Koch & Deetz, 1981; O’Keefe, 1981; Putnam & Boys, 2006).

It is not my intent to determine the most functional or authoritative lay theories in this case. Instead, I am more interested in interpreting how such logics are expressed and implicated interaction (Tompkins, 1984), tracing how they interact with the multiple forms of work that people do (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Vallacher & Wegener, 1987). Moreover, I consider how the notion of lay theorizing can speak to organization scholars’ current interest in *organized tensions* (Ashcraft, 2006; Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004; Harter & Krone, 2001; Trethewey & Aschcraft, 2004). In all, this study offers an interpretive analysis of “sustainability work” and *the role of lay theorizing about communication in that work*.

Third Purpose

The third and last purpose that guides this study is to understand and critique values-relevant communication in a case of environmental advocacy. As I suggested earlier, sustainability is an ethically loaded concept; it inevitably suggests (at the very

least) “moral philosophy or philosophical thinking about morality, moral problems, and moral judgments” (Frankena, 1973, p. 4). It may be possible to limit sustainability-related talk to technical discussion of efficient systems engineering. Still, people’s advocacy *for* sustainability usually involves ethical reasoning and arguments about which decision premises should guide our individual and organizational actions.

I am interested in *both* the participants’ ethical claims *and* their claims about ethics, itself. Organizational scholars have explained how people use ethical claims as a strategic resource (e.g., Kuhn, 2009) and how people frame ethics, itself, in their discourse (Cheney, Lair, Ritz, & Kendall, 2010). Ultimately, the third purpose of this study is to explore how the study’s participants *come to understand* and *use* their notions of communication ethics in their environmental advocacy.

Summary

This dissertation is designed to do at least three things. First, I developed the project as a long-term, ethnographic case study of environmental communication “in” an organization. Second, following discussions with Office staff members between 2007 and 2008, a theoretical focus emerged for the project: lay theories of communication and organizing. Third, I traced the significance of ethics in participants’ metacommunication, especially with reference to sustainability advocacy.

Preview of the Dissertation

I now provide a brief sketch of each of the subsequent chapters. I provide a plan for the chapters but do not engage their central questions in much depth.

Chapter 2: The Case

In Chapter 2, I provide a description of the Office of Sustainability at the heart of this case study. In particular, I discuss how the Office came about and I introduce several people intimately involved with the Office's work. Also, I describe the relationship of the Office to other groups at IWU. This chapter provides necessary background information to understand many of the descriptions and quotations of study participants throughout the rest of the manuscript.

Chapter 3: Sustainability

Chapter 3 is a multifaceted review of sustainability. First, I put the idea of sustainability in a particular historical and social context. Specifically, I consider sustainability against the backdrop of successive waves of the North American environmental movement. I then trace the relatively recent effort to make sustainability a priority for higher education institutions, which participants in my study have called "the campus sustainability movement." Third, I review sustainability's lexical, organizational, and ecological meanings. Finally, I identify and critique three common themes in high-profile advocacy for sustainability. As a whole, Chapter 3 offers an introduction to and critique of sustainability that is historically grounded and communication-centered.

Chapter 4: Theory and Literature Review

Chapter 4 provides the theoretical groundwork for the analysis chapters of this dissertation. I provide definitions of communication, discourse, and rhetoric, as well as organization. With those definitions established, I construct an argument for

communication-centered thinking about lay theorizing. Blending ethnomethodological perspectives (Garfinkel, 1967) with Potter and Wetherell's (1987) concept of interpretive repertoires, I craft a uniquely interpretive perspective on lay theory and theorizing. Finally, I review three well-known treatments of lay theory from different disciplines: Vallacher and Wegner's (1985) action identification theory, O'Keefe's (1988) theory of message design logics, and Argyris' (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schön, 1974) approach to espoused theories and theories-in-use. In the course of that review, I demonstrate how each of these disparate perspectives acknowledges at least three dialectics in lay theorizing. This perspective, I think, may provide some base for future interdisciplinary research on lay theory. Analysis chapters will bring the approach developed in Chapter 4 to the topics of organizational advocacy, voice, and ethics.

Chapter 5: Methodology

Chapter 5 describes this project's methodology and lays out my research questions. I explain why I foreground interpretivist perspectives on organizing but also draw from the insights of critical approaches. I was very much a part of the organizational setting that I analyze in this study, so Chapter 5 provides greater detail on my relationship to the research scene and the means by which I maintained reflexivity. I also explain each of the research methods I used to gather data for this study—namely participant observation, qualitative interviewing, and focus group discussion. I close the chapter by explaining grounded theory methodology, the framework that guided my decisions regarding theory selection, data analysis, and interpretation.

Chapter 6: Advocacy

Chapter 6 applies the approach developed in Chapter 4 to participants' lay theories of advocacy. I begin the chapter by considering participants' general preference for the term "advocacy" over "persuasion." I then trace three interpretive repertoires connected to their conceptions of advocacy for sustainability-related change: (1) the directive repertoire, (2) the expressive repertoire, and (3) the representative repertoire. Ultimately, I attempt to demonstrate how these repertoires undercut or limit the effectiveness of an organization *charged with communicating sustainability* on campus.

Chapter 7: Voice

Chapter 7 is centered on the concept of voice. The most significant contribution of the chapter is the Dialectical Model of Voice Organizing (DMVO). The DMVO explains three dialectical tensions that sustainability officers may confront when attempting to build an *environmental voice* in organizations: (1) the dialectic of facilitation, (2) the dialectic of leadership, and (3) the dialectic of motivation. I developed this model in response to both the case and extant environmental communication theory. On one hand, the DMVO is the result of my attempt to bring some order to the broad constellation of terms used to talk about organizing. As well, the model depicts the kinds of difficulty faced by participants as they worked to cultivate a voice for sustainability at IWU. On another hand, I developed the model in order to (1) extend Senecah's (2004) theory of the trinity of voice and (2) put environmental communication and organizational communication scholars in conversation with one another. Thus, Chapter 7 serves both theoretical and practical ends.

Chapter 8: Ethics

Chapter 8 deals with ethics, principally communication *of* or *about* ethics. I begin the chapter by analyzing interviewees' responses to some variation on the question, "To what extent, if at all, should ethics feature in messages about sustainability from the Office of Sustainability?" I explain how their lay theories of advocacy—as detailed in Chapter 6—affect their willingness to associate sustainability with concepts and messages related to ethics. Following the approach delineated in Chapter 4, I identify three interpretive repertoires that result in their hesitancy to highlight ethical issues in their talk about sustainability: (1) the individual repertoire, (2) the conflict repertoire, and (3) the context repertoire. In the second half of the chapter, I explain that the persistence of the participants' tentativeness is due in part to three preferences implicit in their metacommunication: (1) unification, (2) being reasonable, and (3) unobtrusive control. At the close of this chapter, I argue that these patterns inhibit the ability of the study participants to reflect critically on the ethical implications of their lay theories of communication and organizational strategy.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In the concluding chapter of this dissertation, I comment on the study's contributions and limitations in the domains of theory, research methods, and practice. This study generates important insights from a unique case of the *organizing of sustainability discourse*, but it also leaves some interesting questions unanswered.

Conclusion

This study explores lay theories about communication. In particular, I have traced and analyzed the development of those theories among a group of people organizing for sustainability at a large university in the US. Toward that end, I developed a uniquely interpretive perspective on lay theorizing and applied it to participants' communication about advocacy, voice, and ethics. As I will show in Chapter 3 and throughout this dissertation, sustainability is a human concept more than it is a natural phenomenon. For that reason, it is important to understand *sustainability in terms of communication*. By extension, it is also important to understand *sustainability advocates' communication about and theories of communication*. This dissertation is one step in that direction.

Notes

¹ I do not provide an absolute definition of sustainability in this project. Rather, my goal is to tell the story of people communicating sustainability in a specific organizational context. In Chapter 3, I provide an historical account of the contemporary idea of sustainability and critique common themes in sustainability rhetoric. Still, I will not provide a single, overriding definition of sustainability within this document. Nonetheless, I will occasionally use terms such as “sustainability communication” or “sustainability-related communication” to describe actions that include description, persuasion, dialogue, and such.

CHAPTER 2

THE CASE

Introduction

This chapter reviews the history and prominent features of the Office of Sustainability examined in this study. I begin the chapter with a discussion of the university of which the Office is a part. Second, I tell the story of the Office's creation. Third, I introduce the Office's employees and discuss some of the groups involved in the Office's campus network. Following that, I sketch the campus and community location of the OS. I conclude the chapter by pointing out that the people involved in this case have been unusually reflective about communication, making it a suitable case for the study of lay theorizing about communication, organizing, and sustainability.

The Office of Sustainability

The University: Intermountain West University

The Office of Sustainability featured in this study is part of a university in the U.S. Intermountain West, a region bounded on the east by the Rocky Mountains and on the west by the Cascade and Sierra Nevada Mountains. I give the university featured in this study the pseudonym Intermountain West University (IWU). IWU incorporates more than 30,000 students, thousands of faculty, and almost tens of thousands of people on staff. It is the flagship research institution in its state. The state's citizens predominantly hold some version of conservative/right-wing political views in the state, as is true for

many other states in the region. Like many other research-intensive universities, current economic conditions stress its research, service, and educational efforts. IWU is experiencing growth in student enrollment, and plans to add well more than 5 million square feet to its building infrastructure in the next 20 years. The size of IWU, the great number and variety of operations it supports, the current economic strife, its established and aggressive development plans, and state/local politics make sustainability advocacy in this case a complex, sometimes contentious endeavor.

The Office of Sustainability, which was initiated as a pilot project in July 2007 and announced as a “permanent feature” of IWU on Earth Day 2008, is administratively located in the Facilities Management arm of the university. This location for the Office was suggested early on by advocates for a formal sustainability-centered administrative unit. An associate vice president heads Facilities Management; that position involves the supervision of planning, construction, building maintenance, utilities services, and more.

Importantly, OS staff members have asked others and myself, both directly and rhetorically, “What are we doing in Facilities Management?” They pose such a question with some regularity, and it marks their routine reflection on their location and function in IWU’s structure. This wondering has often been prompted by conversation about the thoroughly *social* activity of Office employees and volunteers. After all, the OS is located in a division devoted largely to *infrastructure, buildings, and the material elements of campus*. By contrast, consider what it might mean for the Office of Sustainability to serve the Vice President for Academic Affairs or to serve a (nonexistent) Vice President for Sustainability?

Obviously, OS staff members spend a considerable amount of time interacting with people employed by or directly implicated in the work of Facilities Management. Yet, I regularly heard OS staff members express uncertainty about the organization's situation in Facilities Management. Their uncertainty is captured, in part, by this expression: "We don't turn any of the dials or flip any of the switches, but we know the people who do." Office staff members and volunteers made statements like this in situations where they were called upon to respond to questions such as, "How, exactly, does your work make the university more sustainable?" The common concern here is that "flipping switches," "turning dials," and such are fundamental to the pursuit of sustainability and central to the work of other Facilities Management departments. These are not, however, activities under the control of Office of Sustainability. The second statement I regularly heard from almost every Office staff person was, "We don't really have any power." This sort of statement informs the first, in that it suggests that *power* is located in the other operations incorporated by Facilities Management or different departments altogether. As well, the statement suggests a less powerful or important position for those who merely *know* the people who do flip switches. Nevertheless, the Office of Sustainability's first strategic plan identifies the organization's central activities as *connecting, collaborating, and communicating*. Such accounts are one way that IWU employees make sense of the purpose of the Office and express tensions pertaining to Office's administrative location in Facilities Management. It also reflects a concern that OS staff members share with other sustainability officers at North American universities and colleges: placement in a facilities management division may

limit the scope and power of any unit responsible for sustainability organizing (Carlson, 2008).

Still, advocates suggested early on that the Office be located in the Plant Operations arm of Facilities Management. In a November 2006 email message to an IWU manager, one staff person wrote that the Office “should be situated in Plant Operations with tentacles that extend throughout the academic and research administrative units.” Today, the OS maintains working relationships with a wide variety of IWU’s organizations, departments, and stakeholders.

Emergence

Usually, the story begins with a garden. A group of students, having started a group under the aegis of IWU’s community service center, hoped to create an on-campus, student-maintained organic garden. Depending on who is telling the story, two to six students are usually mentioned as crucial to the garden plan and, later, the emergence of the Office of Sustainability. Most of the students had taken what is now a popular course in organic gardening from a particularly charismatic professor. According to others’ accounts as well as my impression of him, this professor is enthusiastic about his own work, deeply committed to teaching his students practical thinking and skills, and unusually adept at drawing together global phenomena and the consequence of individual action. His abiding concern for ecological and social change was, as I have been told, very salient in the organic gardening class.

During 2005, members of the new student group conceived of and sought approval for a campus-based organic garden to be tended and overseen largely by students. The garden was to be a site for learning and a public demonstration of

commitment to environmental responsibility. However, the students met with disappointment when an administrator responsible for grounds maintenance rejected their plans in December of 2005. As told to me later, the students were let down that their plans were not perceived to be adequately developed, and that the supervisor doubted that students and student groups would be responsible stewards of university land over the long term. More significantly, students told me that they recognized right away that little or no consideration had been given to the environmental values embodied in the project. Put another way, the students were concerned that environmental premises and sustainability principles seemed to play an insignificant, if any, role in the administrator's decision to not allow the development of a student-led organic garden project on campus.

It was this larger perspective that guided the students' later actions. Documents and accounts from students and faculty involved in these early stages characterize the sustainability "movement" on the campus as "fragmented." There had been other successes. Thanks to the support of the student government and a particularly active member of the faculty, a program to raise money for the development of regional wind-powered energy infrastructure had garnered a fair deal of attention and funds. Several student groups with explicitly environmental missions existed. Earth Day celebrations had, by 2005, become routine. Student research spurred the administration to conduct a comprehensive waste audit. These developments and others reflected the sense that, as an early proposal for a formal Office of Sustainability stated, "The IWU community is highly motivated to pursue sustainability and is calling for leadership."

The students pursuing an organic garden laid the groundwork for such leadership when they hosted a series of open forums on campus sustainability in the fall season of 2006 and winter of 2007. Members of the sponsoring student group perceived a deficit of environmental thinking or concern in campus planning, administration, and education. They sought to bolster the legitimacy of environmental regard in the management of the university and campus life. Additionally, they hoped that such an office would aid in the success of future efforts to establish installations and programs like their failed campus organic garden. (At this time, students maintain several campus-based organic gardens.) A number of people attended first of the public discussions in November of 2006. I did not attend the sessions, but have been told that those in attendance were passionate, that many were already involved with a range of environment-related initiatives at IWU, and that the group included staff, student, and faculty stakeholders. Following the sessions, attendees committed to a common purpose: A campus sustainability office should be established.

A team dubbed The Sustainability Task Force formed after the discussions. Several of the student leaders contributed, as did a handful of university staff and faculty. This small team began drafting proposals outlining the need for the Office of Sustainability. Brief proposals were sent to administrators and other campus leaders. Eventually, the Sustainability Task Force recruited the support of select members of the President's advisory board responsible for recommendations on campus and infrastructure development. In a memo submitted to the IWU's President in late 2006, advocates for an Office of Sustainability offered these initial goals:

- (1) articulating a visible message that sustainability is a priority, (2) coordinating the fragmented current sustainability initiatives ongoing across campus, and (3)

highlighting advances in university sustainability programs such as the significant energy and water conservation successes of recent years.

The advisory board happened to be reviewing the campus' master plan for development at the same time that the Task Force submitted its proposal for an Office of Sustainability. The proposal stated, "The overarching goal of the OS would be to catalyze a transformation to a more environmentally sustainable campus and to institutionalize a commitment to campus sustainability." The presidential advisory board met in February 2007 to consider the proposal. The advisory board endorsed the plan to create an office with probationary status for one calendar year, with full recognition to be granted upon a review of the unit's performance during the probationary period.

August 2007 marked the initiation of the Office of Sustainability as a pilot project. By September 2007, I was convinced that a long-term case study of the development of the Office of Sustainability and the experiences of those working on its behalf would provide rich matter for a dissertation project. Russell Snyder, acting part-time director, Robin Carson, sustainability coordinator, and Lillian Valmer, Office staff member and fellow, were at work designing an Office website, securing a physical workspace, and making contact with people they had begun to label "sustainability champions." Early in the autumn semester, the 15-person steering committee began meeting regularly. In the first week of October 2007, Office of Sustainability staff and a number of the students involved in its creation announced the launch of the Office at an environment-themed event sponsored by the student government. Later that month, the Institutional Review Board at my university approved my study, and I began formal observation of and participation with the staff of the Office of Sustainability.

Office of Sustainability Personnel

Since July 2007, the Office of Sustainability has employed no more than three people full time. Between that time and January 2010, the staff composition has changed frequently and unexpectedly. In addition to the three people currently employed full-time by the IWU as OS staff, a cadre of students have contributed as interns earning academic credit and as work-study employees. In this section, I offer sketches of the Office staff members and key figures its emergence.

Russell Snyder. Before his quarter-time appointment as Director of the Office of Sustainability, Russell Snyder's professorial work was supported in large part by research grants. He taught regularly for a variety of programs and departments, sometimes on the topic of sustainability. Snyder was an outdoor enthusiast as a young man, and his enjoyment of outdoor recreation had not waned with time. His passion for sustainability grew from this connection to the natural world, as well as from his research experiences. Snyder's expertise involved him with some frequency with the mitigation or remediation of industrial pollution. His work involved systems modeling, and *systems thinking* became a prominent trope in his discussion of sustainability, societies, and organizations. In a variety of situations I observed, he described his work as "doing/encouraging systems-level thinking and change."

Through 2008, Snyder was officially designated a part-time employee of the OS. Russell Snyder died from a fall while hiking with his wife and friends on a steep section of desert trail in November 2008. IWU was closed for the Thanksgiving holiday, but word traveled quickly to the Associate Vice President for Facilities Management, and through him to the Office's Sustainability Coordinator, Robin Carson. I recall the weight

and grief of that evening. “Hi, Robin,” I said plainly when I received her call Saturday night. “Brenden, are you sitting down?” she asked. “Russell died yesterday.”

Lillian Valmer. The second time I met Russell Snyder, he introduced me to Lillian Valmer, who led the push for an organic garden with another student. That other student, Yasmin Meadows, would become one of a few key student leaders (including Valmer) in the campaign for a formal Office of Sustainability. Valmer applied for and received a fellowship to serve as the Office’s first full-time employee. Valmer was a senior during the 2006-2007 academic year, the period during which she and others hosted the public discussions and pursued approval of an Office of Sustainability. She earned degrees in several majors at IWU prior to beginning her work at the Office.

As needed—during what she, Snyder, and Robin Carson called “the start-up phase”—Valmer worked on the Office’s website, established connections with sustainability leaders on other campuses in the state, planned public events, and more. Throughout her work as an employee of the Office, Valmer reminded staff, volunteers, and others that the Office came about because of the entrepreneurship of students. In a conversation with me soon before her employment ended and she moved away for graduate school, Valmer told me that she was excited that the OS

just seemed to establish a base [during the pilot year]. For example, [take the student group that I helped start]. Our initial goal with that group was [to] work on gardens. We couldn’t get any of that done [on IWU’s campus]. So, now that this Office is in place, they’re back to their original plan because the support system’s there. It’s just nice to see how we’ve enabled greater and more rapid change.

Robin Carson. Robin Carson was hired as Sustainability Coordinator in the summer of 2007. She was the first full-time staff person hired by IWU for the OS. In the original proposal submitted to the presidential advisory board, Carson’s position was

said to “[require] a creative, self-starting, independent person who communicates well, has experience in coordinating university student activities, and is knowledgeable about sustainability principles.” This description, the proposal argued, befit someone who would be responsible for developing and maintaining an emerging network of people working on or invested in sustainability advocacy at IWU, who would be a primary author of the Office’s strategic plans, who would participate in research work with student interns, and more.

Carson’s previous employment had been with the campus center responsible for coordinating student service-learning projects and organizations. In fact, she had mentored and assisted Valmer, Meadows, and other students involved with the group that sought organic garden space on campus and, later, organized the forums on campus sustainability. Carson had previously worked with the U.S. Forest Service and a range of other organizations that dealt with the natural world in one way or another. Thus, she brought to the OS a breadth of experience in working with stakeholders on environmental issues. It also bears mentioning that Carson continues to maintain an active civic life; she participates actively in a host of third-sector organizations addressing matters as varied as local food production and animal welfare. In December 2007, at the end of the first semester of the Office’s pilot year, Carson told me that she was invigorated by her sense of the enthusiasm for sustainability on campus. Still, she told me, “We’ve got to make real change. I worry that we could just help in greenwashing IWU.”

Karen Adams. Hired to replace Valmer in the summer of 2008, Karen Adams coordinates educational and outreach initiatives for the OS. Adams took the position

following her graduation from a private college in the region, where she was an active participant in student-led environmental initiatives. Her work keeps her in regular contact with students and members of the surrounding community with some interest in the matter of sustainability.

One day in the early summer season of 2008, while Snyder, Valmer, and Carson considered the person they hoped to hire upon Valmer's departure, Carson noted that each of them agreed that the person hired should "incorporate sustainability into their life." The work had to be "more than a job," she said. The others nodded along. I did not know who was in the pool of applicants, as I wanted to avoid influencing their hiring decisions. Still, I was interested in what they meant and asked that of the group. Providing one response, Valmer noted that the work of the Office was in large part "asking others to change," so we should be "willing to change ourselves." Later, Adams would tell Carson and me that this was not merely her first job in sustainability, it was a part of her life's work.

Paul Abbey. Following an extensive search, Facilities Management administrators, Carson and Adams, members of the various working groups interacting with the OS, and students conducted interviews with three candidates for the Director position that opened up following Snyder's death. Paul Abbey was hired in the summer of 2009. Prior to his work at the OS, Abbey was a city planner and Director of Sustainable Design in a local architectural firm. Following his appointment, Abbey moved swiftly to focus a great deal of the Office's effort on the development of a Climate Action Plan. Such a plan is required of signatories to the American College and University President's Climate Commitment. Signatories are called upon to work

systematically for *climate neutrality*, a state in which the organization's functioning has no net effect on anthropogenic climate change. The President signed the Commitment on Earth Day 2008. At the time of this writing, the OS is constructing the plan by facilitating six "task teams" dedicated to distinct but interrelated dimensions of the effort. More than 60 volunteers have contributed to the work of the various task teams. Abbey has told me that this effort laid the groundwork for the future of the OS, but also enacts the kind of participation and collaboration that he believes is necessary for achieving sustainability.

Yasmin Meadows. Finally, Yasmin Meadows deserves mention here. Though she has not worked as an employee of the Office, Meadows was a founder, along with Valmer, of the student group that catalyzed the processes that led to the establishment of the OS. Meadows remained active in the development of community and campus gardens, and worked as a graduate student intern with the Office. Recently, she acted as one of several leaders of the new campus farmers market. Meadows frequently tells people that her aspiration is to one day be community-grounded urban farmer.

Campus Network

Between the summer of 2007 and 2010 Office employees spent a great deal of effort finding and coming into contact with many IWU stakeholders. Here, I sketch several bona fide groups established, facilitated, or supported by the OS. In the course of my observational research, I was required to obtain the consent of people interacting with the group in settings that would not normally be construed as public. I obtained consent from nearly 100 individuals. Many more people interact routinely with the OS,

especially since the commencement of the climate action planning process, which began in the fall of 2009.

Volunteers and partners. I will use the terms *volunteers* and *partners* to identify people who work in behalf of the OS. I use the terms to describe those who use work and personal time to invest in and shape the Office or its objectives. Rather than being rigid analytic categories I have constituted, these are labels that OS employees regularly use. Hundreds of individuals have worked with the Office as volunteers and partners; it is misleading to call these people a *group*. Instead, the image of a network is more appropriate. The OS employees couple and decouple these individuals in an ad hoc fashion, with levels of participation varying across time, tasks, and issue. Indeed, OS employees use the term “networking,” to account for and enable the dynamic and varied relationships maintained with many individuals and groups (see Eriksson, 2005).

Students and student-led organizations. In many ways, the OS was born from the work of a student group. The OS continues to maintain connections with students and student lead groups. As Outreach Coordinator, Karen Adams convenes regular meetings with representatives from a variety of student groups. This gathering was initiated early on by Lillian Valmer, who wanted to ensure that students remained involved in sustainability work at IWU. Undergraduate and graduate students participate in the work of the OS as interns, work-study students, volunteers, and research partners. In addition, IWU’s student government has a Sustainability Board; it coordinates events and attempts to steer policy relevant to Sustainability. Today, teams of students, faculty, and staff compete for grants that fund sustainability-related research and programming on campus. Students conceived of and advocated for the fees and administrative program

that supports those grants. Student empowerment remains an important goal for the OS employees.

Steering Committee. The Steering Committee (SC) developed out of what participants had called the Sustainability Task Force. That group worked to formulate the proposal for the OS, and later met as a Steering Committee charged with providing advice and perspectives to the OS staff. In the summer of 2007, when I first sat in on SC meetings to determine the feasibility of the study, 10 to 15 people attended regularly, not counting OS employees and myself. Today, the group is open to anyone wishing to participate. It meets approximately once per month to serve and guide OS initiatives, as well as to provide a forum for the members to share their stories, request help from others, and hear about recent or relevant research on matters related to sustainability. In late 2009, after I ceased my formal observations of the group, the OS employees began calling this group The Working Group. The name change reflected many participants' desire to do or contribute something seemingly more tangible or consequential for the OS.

President's Sustainability Advisory Board. The President's Sustainability Advisory Board (PSAB) has 12 members. These members were recommended to and approved by the President of IWU. The group's membership includes associate vice presidents, deans, directors, staff members, and students. Their charge is to provide advice to the office and make recommendations to university administrators regarding sustainability-related policy. This group, for example, encouraged the President to sign the PCC described above, and sought to, but failed to, include explicit sustainability language in the opening passages of IWU's most recent campus master plan. The group

has convened as frequently as every 2 weeks, and as infrequently as once per semester, depending upon the activity of the OS.

Staff green teams. In several administrative units across campus, such as the library system and the Office of Information Technology, formal staff teams have formed to address the challenge of sustainability for their organization within the university. In some cases, informal groups have sought to gain influence in their workplace. Office employees—Robin Carson, in particular—coordinate with and support these groups. Carson once told me that this element of the Office’s mission is grounded in the metaphor of *the grassroots*. The aim is to find, encourage, and coordinate semi-autonomous and self-directed groups working on sustainability, which, she said, “may sprout up anywhere.” OS staff emphasized the development of green teams across campus during the 2010-2011 academic year.

The Scene: Campus Office and Other Locations

The Office of Sustainability occupies three small rooms in a building housing an eclectic bunch of organizations, including a military training program, academic programs, the Purchasing Department, and more. The multiwinged structure is, notably, poorly insulated and contains few features that suggest ecological principles were considered during its design. The office is recognizable from the hallway because of the many film, event, and organizational flyers and posters taped to the door and walls nearby. One enters into the largest of the three rooms, which holds several chairs procured from IWU’s surplus supplies department, two tables pushed together to create a conference space, various office appliances, and three computer workstations lined up against one wall. OS interns and work-study students regularly work at these computers,

coming and going throughout the day. The next room to the left now contains two desks, at which the Sustainability Coordinator and Outreach Coordinator work, as well as a large bookshelf holding what has been dubbed the Office's "lending library." The back room is now the Director's office, but both Snyder and Abbey frequently work at laptop computers on the front room's conference tables. As well, the backroom intermittently serves as a kind of greenhouse. For several years, Robin Carson has slung up fluorescent lamps underneath a table in order to husband tomato starts and other garden plants.

However, much of the work of the Office is conducted in other locations around campus. The committees described above meet in conference and event rooms in academic departments' facilities, the student union building, administrative services buildings, and elsewhere. Many times, Office employees would suggest that I meet them to discuss their recent work experiences and other matters at community coffee shops and campus restaurants. As well, the Office has sponsored a range of events in public locations. That the work of a small office was not confined to a specific office space is not unusual, of course.

Movement and Community Connections

At various times, OS employees reported to me that they perceived themselves, in their work roles, to be part of a broader environmental social movement. At the same time, they have expressed concern about the consequences of identifying themselves as activists. This sort of tension has been borne out in the staff's concern—a concern that I share—for identifying the "broader connections" and responsibilities for the IWU suggested by a sustainability-inspired worldview. Simultaneously, they voice their worry that "we can't do it all" or "be responsible to everybody." In fact, most every Office

employee has spoken with me about their sense of dialectical pull between being “out on the campus making change happen” and “spending time inside to build up the Office.” From the beginning, Office staff and partners have worked on several levels and in different spaces simultaneously—developing the foundational texts and routines of the organization while seeking out connections *with* other campus stakeholder groups, in addition to fostering novel connections *between* those stakeholders.

The Office of Sustainability has established connections with the surrounding community. By hosting events, participating in public decision-making processes, coordinating with representatives from other campuses in the region, responding to public pressure on the IWU, and taking other measures the Office staff members have attempted to shape and be responsive to people beyond IWU students, staff, and faculty.

Events. IWU plays host to a great many events that draw attendees from far away and from proximate communities. Since 2007, the OS has designed or co-sponsored a range of events, taking advantage of IWU’s prominence in the community. These include a campus-wide teach-in on the subject of climate change, community forums on public and alternative transportation, regular lectures, and more. Recently, with leadership from Yasmin Meadows and other students, the OS and a university office promoting “wellness” created a weekly farmers market on campus that is open to members of the surrounding neighborhoods.

Such events provide an important means by which Office staff members “identify/highlight successes.” In other words, OS employees and key volunteers often point to public events they have coordinated when publicly describing their successes. For example, a prominent scholar working on issues of sustainability, Doug McKenzie-

Mohr, visited the IWU in 2007 at the request of the OS. McKenzie-Mohr, a social psychologist, held public talks, private workshops, and an executive brunch on the principles of community-based social marketing (see McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). Snyder, Carson, and others had been exposed to McKenzie-Mohr's work at conferences on the topic of sustainability, and the event at IWU enabled them to establish the discourse of community-based social marketing as a common frame for the work of the OS and its campus partners, at least for some time.

Sustainability roundtable. In the spring of 2008, representatives from a number of colleges and universities in the region met at a demonstration house in the area to talk about campus sustainability. (The demonstration house provides an example of environmentally responsive home design and occasionally serves as a small conference center.) Lillian Valmer had worked for most of the spring term to secure the attendance of representatives from all campuses in the area. Most of the colleges and universities did not have mature sustainability efforts, let alone official offices of sustainability on campus. The gathering brought together staff members at the OS, sustainability officers at an area private college, professors from departments as diverse as English and Biology, Facilities Management directors, administrators, and more. In an invitation to the inaugural event, Valmer wrote, "We are hoping [...] to create an ongoing dialogue within the higher education community about future-proofing our Universities and Colleges."

Together, Valmer and I designed a series of exercises for the half-day event in the spring of 2008. She and I facilitated the session to promote open conversation, the sharing of best practices, and brainstorming about the future of the convened group. An

expanded group met to continue the conversation in early fall 2008, and again during the spring season of 2009. During the most recent roundtable, Carson told me that she believed the series of gatherings were primarily “about sharing and just getting people to show up.” In that way, the series of roundtables serve to establish an intercampus collectivity dedicated to issues related to sustainability.

Communication, Organization, and the Office of Sustainability.

The Office’s work has largely been devoted to sustainability advocacy *within* IWU. Still the people and issues involved with the OS inevitably intersect with the broader community and complex social issues. Offices of sustainability are relatively new to universities and other organizations. Because it is a new sort of venture and is charged with coordinating sustainability-related communication on campus, the people contributing to the Office of Sustainability have been uniquely reflective about communication and organizational development. Their heightened attention to communication and organizing makes this a case a particularly good one for the investigation of how organizational change agents and environmental advocates think and talk about communication, itself.

In the next chapter, I explore the history and various meanings of sustainability. In the chapter after that, Chapter 4, I construct a theoretic framework for a communication-centered approach to lay theory and lay theorizing. Together, those upcoming chapters provide a robust base for the analyses presented in Chapters 6 through 8.

CHAPTER 3

SUSTAINABILITY

Introduction

I have two objectives for this chapter. One is to provide context for the concept of sustainability. Specifically, I look at the place of sustainability in contemporary environmentalism and institutions of higher education. The other objective for this chapter is to conduct a short but broad analysis of the current rhetoric of sustainability. Sustainability is variable and indeterminate term, yes. Despite that, a few themes are characteristic of high-profile activism for sustainability. I describe and critique a few of these themes because they constitute the public language that sustainability advocates at Intermountain West University (IWU) used and encountered in their work. Most of the analysis chapters deal with this study's participants' lay theorization of *communication*, especially persuasive communication. Nevertheless, the participants are engaged in *sustainability-related* advocacy and organizing, which is why it is important for me to provide a communication perspective on sustainability. Together, the brief history of sustainability in the North American environmental movement and analysis of contemporary sustainability rhetoric in this chapter provide the background for later chapters.

Chapter 3 has three main sections. First, I discuss the U.S. environmental movement and sustainability's current place in it. In the second section, I narrow my focus to tracking the sustainability movement in North American higher education. That

section examines the intellectual, institutional, and textual roots of the push for sustainability on campus. Third, I conduct a broad analysis of contemporary sustainability rhetoric. For the most part, I base my analysis on public language and well-known texts by North American authors. Concluding the chapter, I explain why this background demonstrates the usefulness of this study of sustainability advocates, one dealing primarily with their lay theorization of communicating and organizing.

Contemporary Environmentalism and the Concept of Sustainability

The concept of sustainability has an interesting place in the context of the U.S. environmental movement. Sustainability is now one of the best known, widely discussed, most institutionally supported concepts related to environmentalism. In this country, the environmental social movement has undergone several significant transformations, which a number of historians used to identify the so-called waves of environmentalism. At least two things are clear: (1) Sustainability is a crucial (discursive) component of the environmental movement today, and (2) the U.S. environmental movement must contend with globalization and related issues when addressing sustainability. I make these points for two reasons. First, the participants in this study maintain an ambivalent relationship with “activist” (individual) and “movement” (collective) identities. Second, the participants in this study were not dedicated to globalization-related matters, for the most part. Yes, they were cognizant of the global implications of sustainability. Still, their work establishing the Office of Sustainability within IWU focused their attention on IWU as an organization, their local community, and regional issues and ecosystems. For that reason, I will not extensively

discuss globalization-related themes in sustainability rhetoric or the data gathered for this study.

The relationship of this study's participants to activist and movement identity is worth discussion at this point, however. A statement from Lillian Valmer, a student founder of the Office of Sustainability, is a good example. In an interview, she told me about her ambivalent and changing relationship to activist identity. She told me that she began to accept the label over the course of her time in college,

recognizing that activism is not a bad thing, and that it is a form of civic engagement and community service in a lot of ways. It's sort of dispelling those myths that I was taught. [... I did not want] to associate myself with something negative. But now [...] I'm not so afraid of it [...] You know, before I became so involved in this work [with the Office of Sustainability], I saw [activism] as an angry crowd of protestors with posters outside of a plant, or PETA, or something that just seemed sort of—um, I don't know—almost rebellious or something. [...] But once I became more involved with the [University's service learning center] and different projects and things, I started to learn like student activists. What is that? Oh, this is a really cool thing. So okay, I'm an activist [*she claps her hands together once*], you know?

Valmer ardently promoted social and environmental change, to be sure. Nevertheless, her comments above cast activism as “a form of civic engagement and community service,” “becoming involved with [...] different projects,” and the like. Furthermore, the activism Valmer identified with is positioned against an image of “something negative.” This is consistent with Killingsworth and Palmer's (1992) observations:

Grass-roots support for environmentalism in America has shifted in recent years away from an exclusive commitment to resistance—the not-in-my-back-yard mentality—to an open commitment to small-scale positive actions like recycling and community education projects that focus on such issues as environmentally conscious shopping, energy conservation in the home, and organic gardening and lawn care. (p. 241)

Of course, the Office email lists were used by faculty and students to discuss the merits of direct action protests on campus, and in the community. Off work hours, many of the

participants in this study volunteered with grassroots and nonprofit organizations working on environmental problems. In December 2008, while I was conducting research for this project, a young man in the Intermountain West region named Tim DeChristopher disrupted a U.S. Bureau of Land Management public lands auction by entering false bids (see Henetz, 2008). His civil disobedience, for which he now faces felony charges, was the subject of intense discussion amongst Office employees and partners. My main points are that the people involved with the OS (1) do sometimes identify their efforts as a contribution to the U.S. environmental movement, though (2) they are ambivalent about labeling their work “activist” or part of a “movement.”

That said, the purpose of the OS is literally the *institutionalization* of environmentalism. Let us use Bryant’s (1953) definition of rhetoric, “adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas,” for the time being (p. 413). The OS attempts to adjust the concept of sustainability to IWU’s unique organizational characteristics and vice versa. Sustainability is an idea with connections to the U.S. environmental movement, and the OS is clearly engaged in environmental rhetoric. For those reasons, it is worth tracking the history of sustainability rhetoric in the environmental movement although the Office I studied is not a social movement organization, per se. Before tracking the history of sustainability in U.S. environmentalism, I should first define social movement(s).

Defining Social Movement(s)

Tilly (2004) notes that the term “social movement [... sponges] up so many different meanings” (p. ix). The scholarly study of social movements began with political-economic theory that “featured protestors as straightforwardly rational and instrumental” (Goodwin & Jasper, 2003, p. 6). Now, social movement studies is a

vibrant interdisciplinary area, and most theoreticians treat movement members as users of “symbols, convincing people that they have grievances, and establishing a feeling of solidarity of among participants”—all through “framing” and the production of “collective identity” (Goodwin & Jasper, p. 6). Historians have followed these turns, concerning themselves with “how, when, where, and why ordinary people make collective claims on public authorities, other holders of power, competitors, enemies, and objects of popular disapproval” (Tilly, 2004, p. ix). In cognitive sociology, scholars have treated social movements as “producers of knowledge” through interaction collective identity (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 3). Other sociologists have focused on the *ideologies* comprising movements, where “Ideology refers to the discourses of the movement, to what people think and say [... especially] the set of ideas expressed by the most active participants” (Garner, 1996, p. 15).

The first scholars of *social movement communication and rhetoric* made similar arguments. They called for historically-grounded (Griffin, 1952), social-psychological (Gregg, 1971), politically-grounded (Smith & Windes, 1975), and functionalist (Stewart, 1980) theory and research. More recently, however, scholars from many disciplines have given communication (including varieties of symbolic interaction) a central place in the study of social movements. Movement studies pioneer Sydney Tarrow (2001) proposed that *silence and voice* are key terms for understanding contentious politics. Jasper (1997) critiques structuralist, functionalist, and other “objective” approaches to social movement scholarship for ignoring the moral, emotional, narrative/biographic, and creative elements of this form of collective action. McGee (1980b) famously staked out

the radical position: “Social movement is a set of meanings and not a phenomenon” (p. 233). McGee further claimed:

We can demonstrate by a survey of public discourse that descriptors of the environment have changed *in common usage* in such a way as to make “movement” an arguably acceptable term useful in formulating the chain of facts we believe to have constituted a real change. The primary objective of a theorist working under such constraint is to *prove* rather than *presume* the existence of “movement(s).” (p. 243, emphasis in original)

Thus, communication is what constitutes a sense of movement in the first place. Social movements are *claimed to be such* by their members or adherents. Alternatively, scholars may use communication-centered analysis to *argue that something qualifies as a social movement*. Let us now look at the history of the U.S. environmental movement charted by scholars.

A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement

The antecedents of modern U.S. environmentalism can be found in “active concern for the natural world and alarm at its various perils [...] back through the twentieth century and into the nineteenth” (Sale, 1993, p. 5).¹ Many scholars have said that the foundations for U.S. environmentalism are the works of Henry David Thoreau (e.g., Cotgrove & Duff, 2003) and John Muir (e.g., Oravec, 1981), especially when it comes to the preservationist stream of the movement (Oelschlager, 1993). Others point to conservationists like Gifford Pinchot and Aldo Leopold, especially their “rejoining [of] eloquence and wisdom in ways that are persuasive and critical” (Bruner & Oelschlager, 1994, p. 392). However, communication scholars have argued we often overemphasize the writings of such 19th-century men-in-the-wilderness, excluding from view the influence of capitalists (DeLuca, 2001) and an array of institutions (Schwarze,

2004) in shaping U.S. environmentalism. I simply want to point out that most narratives about the U.S. environmental movement's history begin with these men's various writings, campaigns, and professional/civic work. In any case, we should avoid unreflectively "[reading] our contemporary concerns [about social movements] into the historical past" (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 81).

Sale (1993) observes, "It is fair to say that there was really no such thing as an environmental *movement*—concerted, populous, vocal, influential, active—before the publication of *Silent Spring*" by Rachel Carson in 1962 (p. 6, emphasis in original). By that time, environmentalism in the United States took hold because the population could "concern themselves with [...] amenities beyond the necessities" thanks to increasing levels of education and rising living standards (p. 7). The period between the publication of Carson's *Silent Spring* and Earth Day 1990 has been called the second wave of U.S. environmentalism. That period was marked by an increase in environmental *organizing*—that is, expanded direct action by a larger number of environmentalist organizations (Cotgrove & Duff, 2003). As well, the second wave period involved the passage of major national laws, including the Clean Air Act (1963), Wilderness Act (1964), National Environmental Policy Act (1970), Endangered Species Act, (1973), and Clean Water Act (1977).

The third wave grew and diverged from the trends established up through the 1980s. Shabecoff (1993) explains the transition from second- to third-wave environmentalism in the United States:

The new group was in many ways more pragmatic and professional, more inclined to cooperate with existing political and economic forces to achieve its goals. The newcomers also recognized that more complex problems such as

global warming and well-organized opposition by powerful industry groups who no longer dismissed them [...] must be met with improved goals. (p. 257)

Through the 1990s, the membership numbers for large environmental organizations swelled. Moreover, environmentalist messages gained greater presence in popular culture. Environmentalists and environmental researchers sought more sophisticated media strategies and persuasive techniques for the next “environmental decade” (see, e.g., Krendl, Olson, & Burke, 1992). Thiele (1999) notes that “the assimilation of environmentalism into the mainstream widened the movement’s appeal and increased its power, but also posed a serious threat to its integrity. That is the danger and merit of co-optation” (p. 21). The great success of the third wave was to make “environmental values, though shallow, [...] pervasive. Anti-environmental values, on the other hand, [remained] marginalized. No anti-environmental alternative [had] gained a coherent and consistent voice” (Thiele, p. 209). That said, corporate and other anti-environmental voices have made strides on two fronts: (1) perverting or marginalizing environmental values in order to limit change; and (2) creating elaborate campaigns, sometimes involving “front groups,” to systematically distort public environmental debate (for a comprehensive history and analysis, see Beder, 1997). Environmentalism did seem to sweep the U.S. prior to the 2000s. For instance, people in political power expressed genuine environmentalist sentiment (e.g., Gore, 1992). Also, Earth Day celebrations in 1990 and 1995 were large, corporate-sponsored, media-friendly affairs. This “green party,” as commentator Thomas Friedman (2008) calls it, waned some during the years of the George W. Bush administration. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. (2005), a prominent environmentalist, called Bush “the worst environmental president we’ve have in American history” (para. 7). Still, the establishment and expansion of the *environmental*

justice movement was a major achievement of the third wave period. Bullard, as cited in Pezzullo (2001), writes that this new strain of environmentalism highlights interdependent social-environmental degradation and aims to “make environmental protection more democratic. More important, it brings to the surface the *ethical* and *political* questions of ‘who gets what, why, and in what amount.’ Who pays for, and who benefits from, technological expansion?” (p. 2). In any case, the legacy of the third wave of U.S. environmentalism is still a matter of active debate.

It is interesting that the concept of sustainability first earned its widespread acclaim during the transition between waves two and three. Later in this chapter, I will discuss three themes of contemporary sustainability rhetoric: ecological foundations, crisis, and (temperate) revolution. Consider these three elements in turn. Ernst Haeckel is credited with inventing the term *ecology* in 1866, just after the death of Henry David Thoreau and during the life of John Muir, two standout voices of U.S. environmentalism’s first wave. The call to action implicit in the crisis theme is reminiscent of the militancy and direct action campaigns characteristic of the second wave. Finally, the postmodern revolutionary zeal characterizing sustainability rhetoric today bears the hallmark of the popularization and commercialization of environmentalism during the third wave. I am not claiming that sustainability rhetoric encapsulates the whole history of U.S. environmentalism. Rather, I believe that sustainability’s many contradictions and ambiguities *stem from the kinds of claims people make with the concept and in its interest*. Contained within those claims are traces of the broad trends in U.S. environmentalism for the last 150 years or so. Having

established that historical context, I now say more about sustainability's current relationship to the environmental movement.

Sustainability and Sustainable Development

Peterson (1997) notes that sustainability is an ancient idea, one with roots in the early systemization of agricultural practices. While those who worked (with) the land in agriculture, animal husbandry, and forestry have long been concerned with “sustainable yield” and “living within the bounds” of natural systems, the notion of ecological sustainability was not given *intersocietal meaning* until the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development's (UNWCED) report in 1987. The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development's (UNCED) “Rio Declaration on Environment and Development” further established sustainability. The UNWCED report, informally called the Brundtland Commission Report, addressed—and, in many ways, *invented*—the problem of global sustainable development. The definition of sustainable development put forward in *Our Common Future* (the title given to the UNWCED report) stressed transgenerational justice at a global scale. Sustainable development was said to be “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987, p. 43). Today, the term sustainability is more popular than sustainable development, in part because of its applicability to matters beyond intergovernmental politics and economics. Additionally, many public intellectuals have worked to deemphasize or strip *development* from the notion of sustainability because of its postcolonial implications (see, e.g., Shiva, 2010). In any case, sustainability is now promoted as a framework for everything from corporate change (e.g., Anderson, 2009) to

everyday life (e.g., Beavan, 2010) and, as I will show in the upcoming section, North American institutions of higher education.

According to Peterson (1997), the broad cultural appeal of sustainability in the global West is indicative of

a transformed environmentalism, which dialectically embraces a number of values from the developmentalist program, including an ideological commitment to achieving universal prosperity by addressing poverty in third world countries and a worldwide market economy (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992). Support of sustainability implies a criticism of past practices whereby science and technology were employed to increase the production of consumable goods, with little regard for the long-term or easily externalized costs, yet it maintains support for the general goals toward which science and technology are directed. (p. 7)

She is highlighting the fact that sustainable development discourse serves an interesting function. Antagonism and resistance were key features of second wave environmentalism's relationship to the larger culture. By contrast, sustainable development talk achieves legitimation by incorporating cornerstone values of North American cultures and economies. Critics have noticed, for instance, that sustainability and sustainable development discourse can accommodate the languages of capitalism (Kendall, 2007; Singer, 2010), colonialism (Shiva, 1992, 2005, 2010), consumerism (Cohen, 2010; Sanne, 2002), and growth (Hamilton, 2004).

While it may be easy to dismiss sustainability because of its ambiguous connection to hegemonic social and economic ideologies, I believe that those points of slippage and interconnection are important. They are points at which environmentalists may gain rhetorical traction, build unique coalitions, and take creative action (Kendall, 2007; c.f., Bruner & Oelschlager, 1994; Schellenberger & Nordhaus, 2004; Schwarze, 2002). For instance, the promotion of "green collar jobs" in the face of the late 2000s

economic collapse presents an opportunity to align the politics of the labor, environmental, and social justice movements (Jones, 2009). Furthermore, the concept of sustainability has some roots *and* considerable appeal in academic disciplines as varied as economics (see Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992), engineering (see Beder, 1996), and philosophy (see Norton, 2003).

Consider also the historical moment at which sustainability and sustainable development earned widespread recognition. Globalization was entering what Robertson (2003) has called its third wave. In recent years, a genuine global consciousness been facilitated by the diffusion of telecommunications and computing technologies, the development of the Internet, the intensification of transnational human and capital flows, and globally accessible media (Appadurai, 1996). While the institutions and ethical systems necessary for a robust global social order may not yet exist (see Appiah, 2006; Singer, 2002), the discourses of sustainability and sustainable development can help people to think of themselves in terms of global systems, both social and ecological. In fact, Office of Sustainability staff and I regularly groused, as Karen Adams once put it to me, that it “pisses me off sometimes” when people reduce sustainability to “just recycling.” This synecdoche, a reduction of one thing to a “smaller” constituent part, was irritating to us because it limited the broad horizons of sustainability. We often treated sustainability as an ethic or mode of environment-related “systems thinking” applicable to all kinds of behaviors and organizational forms. Sustainability and sustainable development emerged at a time of important global transformation, so the concept itself is uniquely *globalized*.

The concept of sustainability both came from and changed the third wave of U.S. environmentalism. The second wave of environmentalism has been characterized as “a specialization of the all-encompassing new left, a part of the niche-seeking strategy that has continued to characterize the new social movements” (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991, p. 91). By contrast, sustainability’s inherent ambiguity and broad scope facilitate its appropriation by and incorporation into a great variety of movements in locations around the world (Hawken, 2007). Peterson (1997) proposes that,

As postmodern women and men, we abandon the notion of progress, but, as humans, we need something to take its place. Sustainability may provide an appropriate substitute because it is less boastful and confident, but it remains equally ephemeral and contested. (p. 32)

Sustainability On Campus

Sustainability is frequently talked about as “the future” of institutions of higher education (Carlson, 2006). Such an expression promotes and naturalizes the institutionalization of sustainability in higher education. If nothing else, sustainability has a rather short history as an enthusiasm of university and college students, staff, and administrators. For example, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) surveyed 70 sustainability officers at institutions of higher education in North America; three-quarters of the respondents said their positions were created between 2003 and 2007 (Association for the Advancement, 2008, p. 2). Communication of sustainability on campus has developed rapidly but received little critical scholarly attention.

In this section, I do three things. First, I discuss one of the main intellectual roots of what has come to be called the campus sustainability movement. Second, I identify

key features of sustainability's institutionalization in higher education. Third, I offer a short and critical review of representative practice-oriented publications on campus sustainability. Over the next three subsections, I will provide some background for my own study *and* point out the need for communication-focused inquiry on sustainability advocacy in complex organizational environments.

Intellectual Roots: David Orr

David Orr, a distinguished professor of environmental studies at Oberlin College, is frequently cited as the intellectual progenitor of the campus sustainability movement. Movement supporters and detractors alike identify Orr's work as a wellspring (c.f., Henson, Missimer, & Muzzy, 2007; Wood, 2010). Orr is best known for his arguments in favor of bringing environmental/ecological science, philosophy, and topics into the heart of educational institutions.

Orr's (1992) *Ecological Literacy: Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* is a widely cited text. One of the book's primary arguments is that the material world has limits, though human beings have constructed ideologies and societies that do not recognize that fact. This is primarily an educational deficiency, Orr argues, and it is one that imperils people and the planet. The notion of "global limits" has long history and prominent place in environmental rhetoric (see Cox, 1982). Thomas Malthus' writings from the 18th century established this concern within the social sciences (see Heilbroner, 1972). Donella Meadows' (1972) *The Limits to Growth* and Paul Ehrlich's (1970) *The Population Bomb* employ the limits trope—though, it should be said, in different ways and with reference to different predictions and prescriptions. Those influential writings and others like them established the obsession with limits in

contemporary environmental rhetoric. Orr's *Ecological Literacy* reinvigorated the limits trope and set the terms for interweaving sustainability and higher education.

Orr's (1994) next book, *Earth in Mind*, centered on the organizations and institutions of higher education, while *Ecological Literacy* emphasized curricular issues. *Earth in Mind* identified disciplinary separation, values-neutral education, and ecologically irresponsible design of the built environment on campus as central challenges facing the movement for environmental responsibility. By 2004, a so-called campus sustainability movement was up and running, and the second edition of *Earth in Mind* (Orr, 2004a) more thoroughly incorporated the concept of sustainability. Orr was by then a leader of the push for campus' transformation, and his book *The Nature of Design* (2004b) focused attention on teaching students architecture, design, and community planning according to sustainability principles. Much of the book details university cases. The confluence of these streams of Orr's work is most apparent in *The Campus and Environmental Responsibility* (Egan & Orr, 1992).

By the mid-2000s, significant subdisciplinary and transdisciplinary fields had grown up around the notion of ecological literacy (see, e.g., Stone & Barlow, 2005). Other scholars expanded the reach of Orr's work by using his writing in new contexts and in the popular press. For instance, Richard Louv (2008) popularized the concept of "nature-deficit disorder" and promoted the "No Child Left Inside" campaign, based in part on Orr's arguments. Orr's (2009) most recent book deals with social responses to climate change and is intended for a broad, nontechnical audience. Indeed, Orr has become a touchstone of sorts. His published work is one intellectual source of the campus sustainability movement, and he has coupled that record with consistent

advocacy in behalf of the various institutional structures that have emerged from the campus sustainability movement.

Institutionalization: Compacts, Professional Associations, and Measures

In 1990, the president of Tufts University convened a group of university presidents and chancellors in Talloires, France. The participants composed and signed the Talloires Declaration, a “ten-point action plan” for sustainability. Signatories claimed that they were “deeply concerned about the unprecedented scale and speed of environmental pollution and degradation, and the depletion of natural resources” (University Leaders, 1990, para. 1). Furthermore, “university leaders must initiate and support mobilization of internal and external resources so that their institutions respond to this urgent challenge” (para. 3). The ultimate goal was “creating an equitable and sustainable future for all humankind in harmony with nature” (para. 4). The Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF) was established according to the Declaration’s plan.

Since 1990, an array of institutional structures has emerged around this issue. Table 3.1 is a timeline of major episodes in the institutionalization of sustainability in North American higher education. A handful of organizations stewarded the movement for campus sustainability to date. ULSF promoted the Talloires Declaration through and beyond the 1990s. Senator John Kerry and Teresa Heinz Kerry were prominent participants in the founding of Second Nature, a nongovernmental organization formed to promote the institutionalization described here. Second Nature encouraged and aided conferencing and coordinating efforts in North America through the 1990s.

Table 3.1
Timeline of the Institutionalization of Sustainability in North American Higher Education

| Year | Event | Description | URL |
|------|---|--|---|
| 1990 | Talloires Declaration composed | Written and signed at an international conference in France, the Talloires Declaration is a first-of-its-kind “ten point action plan committing institutions [of higher education] to sustainability and environmental literacy.” | http://www.ulsf.org/programs_talloires.html |
| 1992 | The Secretariat of University Presidents for a Sustainable Future founded | Now called the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, this organization was established, pursuant to the Talloires Declaration, to recruit signatories, provide support and coordination, and promote the institutionalization of sustainability in higher education. | http://www.ulsf.org/about_history.html |
| 1993 | Second Nature founded | The nongovernmental organization Second Nature was an early advocate of an “education for sustainability movement,” focusing on institutions of higher education. Second Nature played a role in each of the following events. | http://www.secondnature.org/about/ |
| 2001 | Education for Sustainability Western Network founded | Established in part through the efforts of Second Nature, EFS West served as a precursor to AASHE, the current North American association for sustainability officers. | http://www.aashe.org/about |
| 2004 | Inaugural EFS Conference | The 2004 EFS conference, held in Portland, Oregon, was the first North American conference dedicated entirely to sustainability in higher education. | http://www.aashe.org/about |
| 2006 | Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education founded | AASHE grew out of EFS West, and it now “[serves] as the first professional higher education association for the campus sustainability community.” | http://www.aashe.org/about |

Table 3.1 Continued

| Year | Event | Description | URL |
|------|--|---|---|
| 2006 | American College & University President's Climate Commitment composed | The ACUPCC was first conceived of at the 2006 AASHE conference. The compact commits signatories to specific measures in order to achieve "climate neutrality." At this time, there are 686 signatories. | http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/ |
| 2010 | Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System for colleges and universities launched | Developed by AASHE and the Rocky Mountain Institute, The STARS program is the first comprehensive sustainability auditing and reporting system tailored expressly for higher education | https://stars.aashe.org/ |

Ultimately, these efforts came under the aegis of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), founded in 2006. AASHE now functions as the de facto professional association for sustainability officers at colleges and universities, in addition to serving students, administrators, and vendors in various ways.

Most often, organizations publicly demonstrate commitment to sustainability through executive-level pledges. The two most prominent higher education-related compacts on sustainability are the Talloires Declaration and the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment (PCC). Three groups—the original signatories, AASHE, and Second Nature employees—crafted the PCC. It commits signing institutions to the pursuit of “climate neutrality,” a state of operations in which (1) greenhouse gas emissions are minimized to the greatest extent possible and (2) remaining emissions are “offset” by (support for) activities that sequester atmospheric greenhouse gasses elsewhere. The Talloires Declaration and PCC helped legitimize and advertize the broad “steps” they required of signatories. Additionally, these pledges involved crude reporting mechanisms to promote accountability.

Until very recently, there has been little agreement on sustainability auditing and accounting methods at universities and colleges. For some time, various publications have circulated self-report surveys to administrators in order to gauge and compare campuses. For instance, The Princeton Review has for 3 years running provided a “green rating” of schools based upon self-reports and publicly available information. The company has partnered with the U. S. Green Building Council to produce “The Princeton Review’s Guide to 286 Green Colleges,” available online (The Princeton Review, 2010). The Sierra Club publishes a list of “Cool Campuses,” a bit of wordplay

connoting hipness *and* mitigation of anthropogenic climate change. Participants in my study complained regularly about the “hodgepodge” of grades, ranks, and lists of schools according to various standards: sustainable, green, responsible, cool, and so forth. Moreover, they were concerned that much of their time was spent responding to surveys that affected the public image of the university, though the information provided by respondents was not verified. Moreover, the measures, themselves, were sometimes not particularly valid assessments. AASHE attempted to fill this vacuum in 2010 by launching the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS). STARS is intended to be a comprehensive, third-party-verified sustainability audit tailored to institutions of higher education. My participants noted its connection with AASHE. They said that AASHE’s involvement and STARS’ public reporting framework communicate professional credibility, transparency, data trustworthiness and consistency, and network-based support (see Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Lawrence, 2007). By the end of 2010, the program’s first year, 238 schools had enrolled with STARS, including the university addressed in this study.

Institutional structures are emerging for sustainability in North American higher education. Universities are creating and changing executive positions, departments, and offices in the interest of sustainability. Professional and third-sector organizations exist and are growing in size. Collective commitment and formal communications have developed around specific pledges and accounting instruments (see McPhee, 1985). These institutional/structural activities signal important symbolic and material changes (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), as well as unique possibilities for organizational communication praxis (Lammers & Barbour, 2006). While sustainability may be a

passing fad (Zorn & Collins, 2007) or the latest example of ideological groupthink on campus (Wood, 2010), it is clear that the institutionalization of sustainability in higher education is more robust than ever. Nevertheless, the sustainability↔campus conjunction is relatively young, so to speak. For that reason, we should more carefully examine the basic texts promoting sustainability on campus. In the next section, I briefly survey publications representative of the institutional trends that I have already described.

Representative Publications on Campus Sustainability

To date, much of the writing on sustainability and institutions of higher education has been practice-oriented. The intellectual history described above guides most of the book-length manuscripts. Still, many of these titles devote little attention to philosophical or theoretical issues. Indeed, most of the books on the subject are manuals of some sort. In other words, they deal with the mechanics of assessing, marketing, and bureaucratizing sustainability on campus.

Among the first of its kind was Smith's (1993) *Campus Ecology: A Guide to Assessing Environmental Quality and Creating Strategies for Change*. The bulk of the book is contained in three sections: "Wastes and Hazards," "Resources and Infrastructure," and "The Business of Education." In these sections, chapters deal with water, energy, institutional investment portfolios, air quality, environmental education, curriculum planning, etc. The closing section, number four, contains two chapters. One chapter provides rather broad advice to "build coalitions," seek alliances with persons in power, and such. The other discusses campus ecology in terms of environmental justice. These chapters hint at issues of meaning, discourse use, and organizing, but only in the

broadest sense, which is true of many of the campus sustainability books that would follow Smith's. Her book is most useful as an analytic take on university and college campuses in light of environmental issues. David Orr (1993) wrote the forward to *Campus Ecology*. The language he uses in framing the book closely resembles patterns in my study participant's talk. Pay specific attention to the realist tone of the following quotation, the importance of the laboratory metaphor, as well as the characterization of those working in behalf of the environment:

Campus Ecology uses the campus as a laboratory for the study of resource flows and for the implementation of environmentally sound alternatives. [...] It seeks to solve real problems that are embedded in organizations whose decisions shape our lives and environment. Most importantly, this is a book about educating people to think broadly, observe carefully, and act responsibly. [...] It is a vision of renewed educational institutions that lead by example, that catalyze change, and that help communities move toward sustainability. I encourage you to become an active part of this urgent process of renewal and transformation. (Orr, 1993, p. 12)

This passage reads quite a lot like the foundational texts for the Office of Sustainability that I studied. Some of those documents were discussed in Chapter 2 and will be addressed in subsequent chapters. For now, it is enough to point out that certain communicative styles have emerged as common to communication about sustainability on campus. However, those communication patterns are rarely given critical scrutiny.

Smith's (1993) early work was followed by similar publications. Creighton's (1998) *Greening the Ivory Tower* is on the bookshelves in the OS where I did my research. Creighton's approach to the subject of campus sustainability is similar to Smith's. For example, Creighton gives considerable weight to quantitative assessment and less to matters associated with qualitative data. She writes, "Qualitative data are lists of actions that have been undertaken to reduce waste or improve conservation without

specific quantitative measurements of their results” (p. 34). It is reductionist to regard qualitative data as mere lists of actions. However, environmental communicators commonly reduce complex realities into action steps, lists, and bullet points in the interest of being practical—or *sounding practical*, at the least (Luke, 1997).

Nevertheless, publications like these very often merely list actions and dwell upon quantitative measurement of those actions (for a more recent example, see Corcoran & Wals, 2004).

Book collections of case studies are increasingly common (e.g., Barlett & Chase, 2004; Filho, 2000), and case studies are among the most frequently published sort of article in the *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*. Recent handbooks and case studies retain the bias toward “behaviors” and best practices, but demonstrate greater sensitivity toward the role of culture, aesthetics, and symbols (see e.g., Aber, Kelly, & Mallory, 2009; Simpson, 2008). Sustainability is a multifaceted concept and its meaning is dependent upon the contexts in which it is used (Peterson, 1997). Subtle and thorough investigations of the qualitative dimensions of sustainability are important because the term’s negotiated meanings will affect outcomes on campus. Furthermore, many campus advocates have struggled to maintain the integrity of “sustainability” while avoiding its marginalization (Newport, Chesnes, & Lindner, 2003).

Most of the titles discussed in this section are compendia of best practices and confessional narratives of sustainability at specific institutions. They provide broad stories about attempts to legitimate sustainability discourses on university and college campuses, *but they do not provide much analytic attention to organizational*

communication. Where communication is addressed directly, it is usually talked about as a conduit for information and a medium for coalition building (see Axley, 1984; Putnam & Boys, 2006). These publications certainly do not address the ways in which knowledge is constructed *through* the confrontation of system-level contradictions. Of course, Peter Senge and colleagues' various applications of organizational learning theories to the problem of sustainability—which, importantly, emphasize contradictions and systems thinking—seem to be popular amongst university-based sustainability officers (Senge, 1990; Senge, Laur, Schley, & Smith, 2006; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004; Senge et al., 2008). However, the work reviewed in this section certainly does not treat communication as *constitutive* of knowledge.

This study offers perspectives on campus sustainability officers and advocates' lay theories of *communication* and related concepts. I intend to go beyond mere description of the meanings of sustainability in this case. My goal is to elucidate (1) participants' communication practices and (2) the claims that they make about communication. It is my hope that this study provides scholars, environmental communication officers, and other people with some insight into the place of communication in organizations' sustainability efforts. To date, communication has been given limited attention in writings about sustainability on campus. So, I use the “problem of sustainability” as a starting point for crafting a unique approach to lay theorization of communication.

Why Communication Critique of Sustainability Is Important

This dissertation treats “sustainability” as an environmental communication neologism. The term clearly has multiple meanings. In *Orion Magazine*, one author

listed 18 unique “theses” on human-natural world relationships that are suggested by people’s use of the word (Zencey, 2010). Such ambiguity is inherent in the concept, and people strategically exploit that ambiguity (Peterson, 1997). The variability of sustainability’s meaning is even more evident when you consider its applications in organizational, economic, and policy contexts—not to mention personal, activist, or natural science contexts.²

In this section, I track some of the variety of meanings given to sustainability in everyday talk and popular writing. I do not yet delve into the data from my case study of the Office of Sustainability at Intermountain West University. Instead, I draw from writing, colloquialisms, and expressions that are readily familiar to many or most people who would call themselves “sustainability advocates/supporters.” Everyday language embodies certain cultural assumptions for those people working in established organizations, as well as those people organizing for particular goals; such expressions help to shape people’s perception and action (see, e.g., Cheney, Lair, Ritz, & Kendall, 2010, on professional ethics and communication; Clair, 1996, on the phrase “get a real job”). For that reason, this section traces the meaning of sustainability as in several contexts.

Peterson (1997) explains in her thorough rhetorical analysis of the twin terms sustainability/sustainable development that, as with any “totalizing construct” (p. 2),

sustainable development’s rhetorical strength lies in its philosophical ambiguity and range. As an oxymoron, the term both draws attention to the obstacles intrinsic to resisting exploitation (which brings temporary profits but future losses) and encourages the invention of alternative forms of resistance. [...] If sustainable development is to become more than another meaningless bit of jargon, the productive tension within the term must be maintained. (p. 36)

The practical uses to which the concept is being put should be considered. Here is why: The concept of sustainability entwines human interests with extra-human interests, science with ethics and politics, social sciences with natural sciences, and so on. To begin to understand what it is people may be talking about when they talk about “sustainability,” we should first ask, “Sustainability with regard to what?” In the subsections that follow, I explore sustainability’s lexical meanings and their application to organizations and ecology.

Lexical Meanings of Sustainability

The root word for sustainability is *sustain*, of course. Let us start, however, with *ability*. Ability can be defined as the quality of being able to do something, as a skill or talent, or as a capacity. Among those definitions, the first and last are the ones most commonly suggested by everyday discussions of sustainability and “sustainable practices.” The second sense of ability—that is, ability as a skill or talent that is innate or learned—is addressed by Peterson (1997), but primarily in the negative. She borrows Burke’s notion of trained incapacity, “a condition in which our abilities ‘function as a blindness’” (p. 43). The implication is that certain learned skills blind people, individually and collectively, to the *unsustainability* of the status quo. Trained incapacities also complicate attempts to cultivate alternative, “sustainable” skills.³ Lightheartedly, we might call this a “*sustainability*.” In any case, it is interesting to consider that organizations may need to develop some kind of ability to be sustainable.

A survey of several dictionaries also yields a commonsense list of definitions for the word *sustain*. Some definitions are less frequently associated with the environmentalist uses of the term sustainability. In each of the next four paragraphs, I

discuss what several lexical meanings for sustain might mean for sustainability as an ideograph.⁴

The definition of sustain most commonly associated with environmentalist discourse involves terms like *continuance, endurance, and maintained*. Things—be they practices, organizations, or ecological systems—are sustainable if they can be continued or maintained. The so-called sustainable entity or activity is durable over some (presumably extended) period of time. The expression “think sustainably” therefore means to think of the long-term effects of an activity or of the long-term wellbeing of some group or thing. (What counts as “long-term” is, of course, open to debate.) The sense that present conditions cannot be continued into perpetuity contributes a great deal to the theme of *crisis* in sustainability rhetoric, which I discuss later in this chapter.

A second lexical meaning for sustain relates to with *the provision of sustenance*. In this case, the word sustain derives its meaning from a kind of service. One thing serves to sustain another, as, for instance, food sustains human life. This meaning can be found in arguments that treat the natural world as the fundamental source of humanity’s sustenance. It is the source of conceptions of the extra-human world as the ground and society as the figure—or, similarly, thinking of the natural world as base and humanity’s creations as superstructure. Such an image is reflected in the theme of ecological foundations, which I discuss later. This sense of the term sustain does not universally connote disaster, however. For example, Van Jones (2009), an environmental justice activist and former advisor to President Obama, represents an emerging perspective on sustainability and economics. His talk of “green collar jobs” presents sustainability-related economic change as the wellspring of greater economic prosperity and equity.

Sustainable economies are said to offer whole communities sustenance through the preservation of several types of capital (see also Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999; McKibben, 2007). In other words, reorganizing societies according to sustainability principles affords richer sustenance to a greater number of people. Thus, sustainability rhetoric suggests that the present form of human society undermines its own prerequisites, but may be saved/enriched by a turn to broad environmentalist values.

A third definition presents an interesting possibility: Sustain means *to bear or endure*, as in the phrase “sustain an injury.” This definition resembles Burke’s (1969a) account of the *tragic* frame. In tragedy, the agonist suffers the consequence of his, her, or others’ passions. Peterson (1997) argues that the idea of sustainability is more commonly associated with comedy, and that the idea should be critiqued from that perspective:

The comic frame offers the more humane corrective to troubling situations. It encourages acceptance of material conditions by acknowledging that all aspects of reality are somehow related to all others, whereas the tragic frame emphasizes separation and division, which encourages oppositional interpretations of situations. (p. 39)

Yet scholars have recently challenged the comic framing of environmental problems and conflicts. Schwarze (2006) challenges Burke’s (and, by extension, Peterson’s) valorization of the comic frame. Schwarze demonstrates the value of environmental melodrama for communicators who are systematically marginalized and harmed by the very social institutions meant to deal with environmental matters. Žižek (2009) and Sturgeon (2009) argue that the unity and harmony implicit in popular images of ecology minimize the *politics* that must be addressed in order to achieve substantial social movement. Humans have not borne the environmental degradations of modernity

equally, and they will not equally share in the benefit of environmental “progress” as it is currently conceived (Kendall, 2008). These points are related to the theme of *revolution* in a good deal of sustainability-related discourse.

The fourth and last definition of the word sustain gets its meaning from law and science. To sustain can mean *to corroborate, prove, or affirm*. Like the third definition I discussed, this one is not frequently associated with the environmentalist discourses of sustainability. Still, it should be apparent that the language of sustainability could be used to *legitimate* worldviews and ideologies.⁵ This meaning of “sustain” reveals the self-affirming nature of sustainability discourse. When a particular program or perspective is aligned with the concept of sustainability, it may enjoy increased appeal or acceptance. After all, who would be against ongoing and enriched human life? Zoller (2003) demonstrates a similar consequence in the promotion of “health” at a workplace recreational facility. Managerialist values were positively associated with “health,” an abstract concept that is difficult to contest, and workers lost some autonomy as a result. The same is possible with talk about sustainability. For that reason and the others described above, any application of sustainability deserves critical attention.

Organizational Meanings of Sustainability

For a moment, let us strip the term sustainability of any connotations of the natural world. Assume that sustainability is a concept that has nothing whatsoever to do with ecology or the environment. Now consider what the term might mean for organizations and their members. Against this backdrop, the preoccupation with being “sustainable” is certainly not new. Indeed, research on organizational autopoiesis, or self-organizing, has demonstrated that organizations exist largely to perpetuate themselves

(Luhmann, 1990; Taylor, 2006). In the 1930s, Barnard (1938/1968) made the case that organizations are essentially transient. Even the mightiest organizations fail or fundamentally change with remarkable frequency. Sustainable organizations are *exceptional*, not normal. For this reason, the contemporary sense of sustainability (grounded in the language of ecology) is a present-day manifestation of an old goal: durability over time. Granted, the concept of ecological sustainability suggests meanings related to social justice and the wellbeing of the commons. Nevertheless, organizational talk about ecological sustainability is often grounded in anxiety over the permanence of the collective. After all, very few organizations ever willfully end their own existence (Cheney, 2002). As one participant in this study put it to me: “The bottom line is this: We can’t keep doing this forever.” His statement and others like it are based upon the belief that the status quo cannot be maintained. Moreover, the belief goes, if it is maintained, the organization will be placed in jeopardy. Thus, sustainability is and has been a fundamental organizational concern—a concern that predates (but is not the same as) public anxiety about the global environment.

The lexical and organizational meanings of sustainability sketched above largely connote stability and durability. By contrast, Papa, Singhal, and Papa (2006) describe the ways in which organizing for social change is inherently dynamic. Four dialectics characterize those change processes: control-emancipation, oppression-empowerment, dissemination-dialogue, and fragmentation-unity. Remaking organizations in the interest of sustainability should involve some measure of these social change processes (see Pepper, 1984). People negotiate the dialectics through praxis, but can never fully resolve the oppositions. This insight draws attention to the second meaning of *ability* described

above. The “sustainable organization”—as a fixed, stable, perfected entity—is a fiction. Or, at the least, it is an idealization. I believe that it is more reasonable to speak of sustainability *organizing*. Crafting and maintaining organizations that are less ecologically disruptive and destructive, more humane, and more economically sound is an ongoing and complex process. Importantly, that process requires people to grapple endlessly with the dialectics of social change. In the context of the environmental transformation of organizations, we might call this *sustainment*. Such a process-centered term is more appropriate for our purposes than the simple adjective “sustainable.”

Ecological Meanings of Sustainability

The science of ecology provides the central images and root metaphors for contemporary environmentalism (Pepper, 1984). Ecological rhetoric offers much to environmental advocates. It explains complex interactions and interdependencies between species and places. Similarly, the science of ecology offers a useful shorthand conceptualization of locales as open systems. And yet, ecosystemic perspectives may also excuse the increased mechanization of the world. The thinking (and speaking) goes like this: Some objective kind of “ecosystem” is threatened. Technology is required to moderate the relationship between humans and the planet. The implicit logic: “The active subject humanity threatens the object earth” (DeLuca, 2005, p. 72). That easy assumption deserves critique.

Capra’s (2002) *The Hidden Connections* fused social theory and ecosystem theory to articulate “a science of sustainability.” He treats the material sciences as the study of matter (material structure) and form (pattern of organization) in process (the interaction of the previous two over time). Capra points out that different branches of the

physical sciences tend to focus on different elements of this trinity. His perspective unifies the three. To understand human life and sociality, he adds a fourth component: meaning. Meaningfulness and meaning-oriented practices “play no role in most of the nonhuman world but are essential to human social life,” writes Capra (p.73). He does, however, argue that the human and extrahuman worlds both organize around the fundamental principle of self-reference. Above, I discussed the role of autopoiesis in organization theory. Capra insists that self-creation and self-reference are characteristic of human and nonhuman worlds. Much writing about sustainability involves or implies this claim. For instance, Benyus’ (1998) concept of biomimicry seeks to redesign human systems according to the apparently natural elements of ecosystems. Leopold’s (1949) conception of biotic community positions humans as *members* of a network or energetic exchanges rather than as *conquerors* of the community. These approaches and others *accord ethical significance to the ecosystemic perspective, itself*. That is, these positions assume that a clearer, systemic perspective is possible, preferable, and necessary.

The notion of sustainability assumes that human beings can threaten or are threatening ecosystems locally and globally. The discourse of sustainability assumes that humans can order their activities in a manner that sustains ecologies. The notions of ecology that lie at the core of sustainability discourse position humans as members of ecosystems, but exceptional ones. Our exceptional quality lies in the extent to which we are self-reflective and the degree to which our technologies enable us to affect the rest of existence. Bullis (1996) points out that ideologies like ecofeminism may serve human and nonhuman interests by drawing the two closer together. At the same time, she notes, conflating human and extrahuman interests may in fact deepen the domination of nature.

McKibben (1989) labeled this the “second death of nature.” This second death is essentially the mechanization of the world described above. The problem is: If human beings are making ecosystems less sustainable or unsustainable, how are we to respond? The ecosystemic themes in sustainability discourse may, on one hand, encourage people to *relinquish (the idea of) control of natural systems*. On the other hand, this discourse may encourage deeper human involvement in and/or control of natural systems in order to “save” and sustain them. Consider the example of geoengineering. Some geoengineers support large-scale alteration of environments in order to remake those environments in the image of “healthy” ecosystems, and their arguments are increasingly popular. The irony, of course, is that the image of ecosystem health is usually a more “natural” and less human-dominated one.

Summary

Sustainability discourse certainly encourages thinking in terms of a crude binary (i.e., sustainable-unsustainable). Yet it is rarely the case that perspectives on environmental issues are so easily dichotomized (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992). Indeed, the meaning of sustainability in any given situation is part of the social construction of that very situation. Moreover, participants’ theories of communication will influence the social construction of the situation, and thus the meaning ascribed to sustainability—a tautology, if ever there was one (Waddell, 1995). What is to be sustained, how it is to be sustained, and why it is to be sustained is often ambiguous or implicit in sustainability discourse. This problem draws our attention to the importance of *interest* and *motive* in the practical use of sustainability discourse (cf. Schwarze, 2007). Rather than fret over specific definitions of sustainability, it is more fruitful to

track the interests of those who employ sustainability discourse. As well, it is important to look at the ways in which the features of sustainability discourse, itself, can motivate people. Burke (1936) makes the point eloquently:

Our interests may tend to confine our thinking with in certain channels, being prejudicial to the extent that they give us cues as to what we shall stress or disregard. But interests need not deceive us in the sense that “the wish is father to the thought.” (p. 330)

Sustainability rhetoric usually draws from some of the lexical meanings of sustain more than others, and its application in the realm of organizations and ecologies bear similar meanings. In the next section, I describe several major themes in sustainability rhetoric. I argue that these themes stem from and are reinforced by the appropriation of some definitions of sustainability more frequently than others.

Major Themes in Sustainability Rhetoric

At least three themes run through most popular, high profile takes on sustainability: (1) ecological foundations, (2) crisis, and (3) revolution. I believe that these thematic elements are due in part to the selective use of some meanings relevant to sustainability. First, the predominant if implicit definition of *ability as capacity*, rather than skill, contributes to the prevalence of these themes in sustainability rhetoric. Second, defining *sustain as continuation or life-giving*, rather than suffering or affirmation, also contributes to the overwhelming prevalence of these themes. Additionally, organizations’ preoccupation with maintaining a stable existence reinforces these themes, as does reliance on the language of ecology.

I intentionally use the term *rhetoric* in this section on three major themes of sustainability rhetoric. In Chapter 4, I address the difference between rhetoric and

discourse; please see that chapter for a more extensive discussion. While I acknowledge that there are many definitions, let me simply define *rhetoric as language and other symbols used in the service of some sort of influence*. There are three reasons that the term rhetoric applies to the texts, messages, and colloquialisms interpreted below. First, the communication(s) I address is (or are) active attempts to construct, influence, and represent “social knowledge” about sustainability (Farrell, 1976). Second, most all of the examples demonstrate “the art of the persuasive dimension in discourse” (Leff, 1999, p. 62). In other words, these examples are all attempts to persuade, to use language in order to influence others in some way. Moreover and third, I am reconstructing “textual fragments” in order to make an argument about the “discursive fragments of context” in which sustainability advocates make claims (McGee, 1990, p. 287). According to this third treatment of rhetoric, we can think about my writing in two ways. On one hand, I am trying to show you *the symbolic situation in which* people usually make claims about sustainability. On another, I am gathering together *the symbolic resources with which* people usually make such claims. So, those are three different rationales for adopting the label rhetoric, and each helps explain why I am critiquing sustainability *rhetoric* in this section. That is, according to a variety of definitions, it is appropriate for me to say, for the purposes of this chapter, that I am critiquing sustainability rhetoric.

Ecological Foundations

The first theme appearing consistently in sustainability rhetoric is the belief or claim that ecosystems are the fundament of human existence. The gist of this theme is that open, dynamic, living systems are *the* foundation of all life on Earth. Pepper (1984, p. 68) calls this a “neoplatonic cosmology.” Put another way, ecology is inextricably

part of being human; humans cannot rise above or conquer the biotic webs that make up Nature with a capital N.

To put this theme in perspective, take Corbett's (2006) spectrum of environmental ideologies. Her spectrum is bounded by two polar worldviews, anthropocentrism and ecocentrism. Insistence on ecological foundations is *not* limited to the most strident ecocentric ideologies. Rather, the theme is simply a repudiation of the central tenets of anthropocentric ideology, an ideology which coheres around the premise that "humans are superior to and dominate the rest of creation, and the natural world is ranked hierarchically with humans at the top [... and] humans consider themselves separate from nature, if not alienated from and fearful of it" (Corbett, p. 27).

A good and widely cited example of this first theme comes from Gaylord Nelson, the former U.S. senator who established Earth Day. The quotation is particularly apropos because Nelson uses the anthropocentric language of the economy to argue in favor of the perspective I have described. Nelson (2002) says that "explaining things in economic terms helps" people understand environmentalist perspectives:

The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment. All economic activity is dependent upon that environment and its underlying resource base of forests, water, air, soil, and minerals. When the environment is finally forced to file for bankruptcy because its resource base has been polluted, degraded, dissipated, and irretrievably compromised, the economy goes into bankruptcy with it. The economy is, after all, just a subset within the ecological system. (p. 18)

Nelson's metaphor uses the language of economics in order to secure a more fundamental place for ecology. "The environment" is the foundation of a thriving economy and thus of a thriving human population. The necessity of ecology is apparent in the clichés of environmentalism, as well. Take, for instance, the image of "Mother

Earth,” in which humans are born collectively from our Mother, who nurtures, protects, and sustains us. Without her, we do not exist. Bumper stickers with pictures of the globe implore people to “Love Your Mother.” As you can see, this thematic treatment of ecology runs through metaphors, aphorisms, and images associated with sustainability.

This theme is common in university-related sustainability rhetoric, too. As a trope, “ecological foundations” is often used as a marker of change. That is, the problem of sustainability is said to necessitate *systemic, total, or transformative changes* in behavior, culture, and/or technological infrastructure. The director of the Harvard Green Campus Initiative (now Harvard Office for Sustainability) wrote this way about “the environmental imperative”:

In short, every natural life support system is in long term systemic decline and every human contributes directly or indirectly to the escalation of this decline. If universities are going to survive into the next century, they must not only respond to this new force which, for the duration of this essay, will be termed the environmental imperative, but they must also provide leadership for broader society. (Sharp, n.d., p. 3)

The director goes on to cite the work of Peter Senge, arguing, “Universities must become learning organizations, as well as teaching and research institutions” (Sharp, n.d., p. 3). The director’s vision of learning organizations involves confrontation of the “absurd consensus” that produces “the [current] degree of inaction around this profoundly life threatening situation”—that is, “the demise of the planetary systems that support human life” (p. 8). Unsurprisingly, Harvard University is frequently cited as a “leader” in the campus sustainability organizing movement. Rhetoric like that of the Harvard Green Campus Initiative is representative of patterns in sustainability rhetoric at institutions of higher education. Insistence on ecological foundations is pervasive in sustainability rhetoric within and beyond universities.

Crisis

The theme of global crisis also pervades sustainability rhetoric. It should be obvious that the prospect of an unsustainable society and/or natural world is a crisis for humanity. In fact, there are twin crises implied in the popular rhetoric of sustainability. The first crisis is said to exist because of humanity's disruption or destruction of natural things and processes. The natural world is presumably in peril. And, given the theme of ecological foundations, humanity is thus in peril, too. The most widely known proponent of such a view is Al Gore. His 2006 book and associated multimedia campaign, *An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It*, is principally designed to instill a sense of crisis in audience members. The title for Gore's (1992) other much-heralded book, *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*, hints at both of the first two themes, ecology and crisis. Other prominent though less well-known environmentalists rely explicitly on the crisis frame in their writings for broad audiences. Environmental philosopher David Orr (2009), whom I discussed at length above, titled his recent book on the science and social implications of anthropogenic climate change *Down to the Wire: Confronting the Climate Collapse*. These titles owe much of their perspective on global crisis to Rachel Carson (1962), who wrote in the classic *Silent Spring*, "We stand now where two roads diverge. But [...] they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster" (p. 277). The first sense of crisis in sustainability rhetoric locates this disaster first and foremost within the natural world.

The second sort of crisis prevalent in sustainability rhetoric is human-centered. For those who are not ecological fundamentalists, “sustainability” labels the crisis facing human social systems. Their reasoning is that, while natural systems may be severely disrupted by human activity, social systems are more immediately threatened. Comedian George Carlin (1992) humorously (and crudely) captured this position when he quipped, “The planet is fine. The people are fucked.” An example is Kuntsler’s (2005) bleak book on the intersection of a number of challenges, titled *The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century*. More sober engagements with this second sense of crisis usually talk about the economic consequences of remaining unsustainable. The collection *Changing Climate, Changing Economy* (Touffut, 2009) represents this position well. These essays assume that economics as currently practiced simply cannot be sustained—or can be sustained, but at too great a cost. The authors of *Natural Capitalism* (Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999) draw upon the second crisis frame when they write: “We believe that the world stands on the threshold of basic changes in the conditions of business. Companies that ignore the message of natural capitalism do so at their peril. [...] What we are saying is more pressing than a request.” (p. xiii). Rhetoric of this ilk brackets the question of whether or not the natural world is fundamentally in jeopardy. The focus is instead upon substantial threats to present-day lifestyles or social systems. Whether or not sustainability advocates dwell on the foundational relationship between human life and ecosystems, most all of them raise the specter of global crisis for society, nature, or both.

Scholars have picked up on this theme. After all, throughout its history, environmentalism has been colored by apocalyptic and jeremiadic language (Daniels,

1999; Killingsworth & Palmer, 1995; Opie & Elliot, 1996). In the inaugural essay of the journal *Environmental Communication*, Cox (2007) proposed that the environmental communication be treated as a “crisis discipline.” Cox compared our discipline to conservation biology, arguing that scholars have a moral responsibility to address our “moment of conjunctural crisis, defined in not insignificant ways by human-caused threats to both biological systems and human communities, and also by the continuing failure of societal institutions to sufficiently engage these pressures” (p. 6). In response, Schwarze (2007) argued that the frame “discipline of crisis” better suits the intellectual and moral commitments of communication scholars. He meant that “a truly reflexive, crisis-oriented environmental communication discipline should make *environmental crisis itself* a central theoretical concept and object of inquiry” (p. 94, emphasis in original). Either way, leading scholars locate the crisis trope at the *heart* of environmental communication studies, though it is just one element of the discipline.

Revolution

The third theme prevalent in sustainability rhetoric is revolution. In some instances, the move to more sustainable humanity is nothing short of a sweeping overthrow of the status quo. Such a radical shift is taken as necessary, given the kinds of crises evident in the second theme of sustainability rhetoric. In our darker moments, the OS staff and I would sit and talk about the overwhelming scale of change we thought was necessary; we would sometimes confess to one another that we felt as though “radical change” wasn’t likely across the globe, in our region, or even for IWU. We hardly felt as though we were participating in what the social critic David Korten (2007) calls “the great turning.”

The idea that social change toward sustainability involves a revolution pervades sustainability rhetoric. *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman is perhaps the best known advocate of social sustainability writing today. In his bestselling *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, Friedman (2008) claims that the social change required is nothing short of systemic: “And in politics and economics, there is a simple term that describes the process of replacing one system with another: *revolution*. Some people say that is what we’re having right now—a green revolution. I beg to differ” (p. 246, emphasis in original). Friedman characterizes the current approach to sustainability as one in which “everybody gets to play, everybody’s a winner, nobody gets hurt, and nobody has to do anything hard. As I said, that’s not the definition of a revolution. That’s the definition of a party” (p. 252). Another bestselling book, insists that the move to sustainability is or must be revolutionary; the titular tagline for *Natural Capitalism* is “the next industrial revolution” (Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999).

In other instances, the theme of revolution is exploited in an offhanded or banal way. The sentiment that ecological-mindedness is at root a revolution can be seen in the following comment by noted scholar of ecological education David Orr (2005); it is, however, one casual statement in a litany of observations about contemporary changes: “The possibilities for transforming manufacturing and technology to mimic natural systems are revolutionary” (p. x). Organizational learning guru Peter Senge wrote *The Necessary Revolution* with a team of management and sustainability experts (Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, & Schley, 2008). While the authors describe the sustainability revolution as “perhaps the greatest learning challenge humans have ever faced,” they insist that their book—grounded in the metaphor of a revolution, mind you—“is not pie-

in-the-sky rhetoric or intellectual idealism, but in fact [...reflects] ways organizations and individuals are already working together” (p. 12). This is the *domestication of revolution*. As an added example, take Lester Brown’s (2009) very popular *Plan B* series of books. (Brown was among the first intellectuals to define and disseminate knowledge about sustainable development [see Peterson, 1997].) The most recent edition, *Plan B 4.0*, is billed in the subtitle as a plan for “mobilizing to save civilization.” Revolution plays an interesting role in this plan for civilization’s salvation. In two chapters, Brown details the possibility of a “lighting revolution” and an “efficiency revolution.” These are technical and technological feats, for the most part. When it comes to society, however, Brown calls for “social *change*” rather than social *revolution*.

Such a move points up “a possible problem with trying to create an appeal that communicates both a sense of urgency and a plan for action,” as Killingsworth and Palmer (1992, p. 263) observed of Brown’s writing in the 1980s. When such rhetoric is considered as a whole, the impression is this: The so-called sustainability revolution ought to be a revolution, but not *that kind* of revolution.

Critical Perspectives from Communication and Organization Studies

These themes are not inconsequential. McGee (1980b) points out that the *movement* of social movements is primarily an effect of rhetoric. That is, social movements cohere around sets of meanings, and their “success” is determined according to social negotiations rather than objective measures. As such, the variability within and across the three themes discussed here is problematic. Ecosystems are supposedly the foundation of humanity, but exclusively human crises should be sufficient to motivate action. The crises facing humanity are supposedly total and sweeping, but the

sustainability revolution is strangely modest and progressive. In short, the rhetoric of sustainability suggests that advocates of sustainability hedge their bets, so to speak. The argument might go like this: ecocentrism is a necessary part of social change, though it is necessary to say so only when persuasive. Also, the social change advocated is a radical response to unprecedented crisis, but it won't upset the status quo too greatly or violently. Some critics examine these fault lines and assert:

Environmentalism is tired. It is a movement both institutionalized and insipid. The vast majority of Americans claim to be environmentalists while buying ever more SUVs, leaf-blowers, and uncountable plastic consumer goods. Indeed, environmentalism itself has become just another practice of consumerism, a matter of buying Audubon memberships, Ansel Adams calendars, and "biodegradable" plastic bags with one's Sierra Club credit card. As a practice of everyday life, environmentalism has devolved into another lifestyle choice. (DeLuca, 2005, p. 67)

Sustainability rhetoric has too frequently been used to quell controversy and make environmentalism marketable or politically palatable. This sentiment was evident in a turn of phrase from one professor of biology in my study: "The point is not for us to figure out how to be *less unsustainable*."

It is important to ask whether or not the rhetoric of sustainability is suitable for the task of transforming organizations. Scholars of organizational communication have begun to respond to those questions. The critiques they provide largely respond to the insight that modern language obscures humanity's multifarious relationships to nature:

These remnants of symbolic signifiers of nature express a relationship to nature that strives to efface everything which cannot be measured by the yardstick of utility. Modern society has made great strides in the attempt to erase these broader symbolic meanings from its collective consciousness. (Eder, 1996, p. viii)

Ecofeminists (e.g., Bullis, 1996), poststructuralists (e.g., Livesey & Graham, 2007; Livesey & Kearins, 2002), Marxists (e.g., Luke, 2001), and others (e.g., Campbell,

Follender, & Shane, 1998) have examined the processes by which organizations' environmental rhetoric position organizational interests above social justice and environmental wellbeing. In other words, it seems as though the bulk of organizational rhetoric dealing with sustainability serves organizational image above all else and may, in fact, deepen rather than resolve environmental problems. After all, the language of organizational proactivity and dialogue, especially corporate versions of those practices, can be used to systematically distort communication (Zoller, 2004; Zoller & Tener, 2010). While sustainability is usually framed as a grand prospect for organizations, economies, and societies—sometimes even *all life on Earth*—organizational sustainability rhetoric has been shown to limit rather than promote change (Ganesh, 2007). Organizational sustainability rhetoric can exemplify organizational narcissism, meaning that it has more to do with image making than anything else (Ganesh, 2003). It is important to locate these problems within the larger prospects suggested by sustainability as an iteration of the U.S. environmental movement.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the language of sustainability, with specific attention to the idea of sustainability in higher education. Sustainability on campus may manifest itself with reference to the term's lexical, organizational, or ecological meanings. Broader rhetorics of sustainability entail the themes of ecological foundations, crisis, and revolution, but texts focused on higher education have concentrated on developing practical metrics and sharing stories about success and disappointment in particular cases. This is an instance of *fusion* more than confusion. For, sustainability discourse is

an example par excellence of what Burke (1969a) terms the principle of merger: “the comprehension of scattered particulars in one idea” (p. 403).

If sustainability is scattered particulars in one idea, communication of or about it will be complex. I want to understand *how* people make knowledge claims about sustainability and also what they (claim to) know about *communicating* that knowledge. The way we frame the environment matters (Lakoff, 2010), and I contend that the ways in which we treat *communication for* organization’s environmental change matters, as well. In the next chapter, I develop a unique theoretical perspective on lay theory and theorizing. That perspective is based upon a review of literature on lay theory from several disciplines, including communication studies. The framework I create in Chapter 4 should provide a useful way to look at people’s lay theorization about sustainability, communication, and related topics.

Notes

¹ A brief reminder to the reader: I acknowledge the fact that speaking of “nature and society” or “the human and the extrahuman” tends to reify dichotomous thinking about environmental matters. For the sake of clear expression, I will occasionally use these sorts of labels and comparisons. Please bear in mind the limitations of such expressions.

² For instance, see Beder’s (1994) discussion of the *social dimensions* of “sustainable technology.”

³ This treatment of *ability* is akin to Tsoukas’ (2005) definition of organizational knowledge as a “capability [that] members of an organization have developed to draw distinctions in the process of carrying out their work, in particular concrete contexts, by enacting sets of generalizations” (p. 128). The application of those generalizations “depends upon historically evolved collective understandings and experiences” (p. 128).

⁴ See Chapter 4 for a definition and discussion of ideographs.

⁵ Rhetorically-oriented scholars have begun to critique the way in which potentially contentious plans are made palatable by virtue of their association with concept of sustainability (Kendall, 2008; Peterson; 1997; Singer, 2010).

CHAPTER 4

THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter provides theoretical perspectives on the issues that I deal with throughout this dissertation. Chapter 4 is divided into four major sections. First, I explain how I will use the terms *communication*, *discourse*, and *rhetoric*. Second, I offer a perspective on *organization* that is rooted in the interpretive turn organization studies. Third, I build an argument for a communication-centered approach to lay theory and theorizing. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) conception of "interpretive repertoires" plays a special role in that approach. The theoretical framework I develop is similar to perspectives on narrative, metaphor, framing, and sensemaking in organization studies, so I offer comparisons to each. Fourth and finally, I use the perspective I have established to critically review select literature on lay theory from three different disciplines. Ultimately, this chapter presents a perspective on lay theory and theorizing that is centered on discourse and discursive practice, appropriate for organizational research, and responsive to scholarship from multiple disciplines and epistemological traditions.

Perspective on Communication

This section defines communication, discourse, and rhetoric. I position discourse as a *form of communication*, and rhetoric as a *form of discourse*. At the end of the section,

I explain that a discursive-rhetorical view of communication is appropriate for this study because *sustainability is an ideograph*, which is a term that links rhetoric to ideology and broader discursive practice.

Communication

I will use Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, and Ganesh's (2004) definition of *organizational communication*: "It is a complex system of symbols, messages, efforts, and activities—a network of contributions from its members and from people and groups outside of its boundaries" (p. 8). This definition has several useful features. First, the definition encompasses a range of practices, which is important to organizational communication's status as a practical discipline (Cheney, 2007; Craig, 1989). Second, this definition emphasizes that organizations are really ongoing processes of *organizing*, and that person's contributions are always situated and incomplete (see Weick, 1979). Thus, communication is a primary means by which people organize.

I treat communication as a master category encompassing a variety of types of meaning making and information sharing. As I explain below, discourse is the language-centered dimension of communication and rhetoric is a particular kind of discursive practice. Thus, early on I framed this dissertation project as case study of rhetorical activity undertaken by members of an organization that uses and creates sustainability-related discourse.

Discourse

Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) also position communication as a broad, encompassing domain of meaning making. They write:

We contend that “communication” and “discourse” are not synonymous. [...] A concern for discursive formations encapsulates but goes beyond the linguistic. Communication, as distinct from discourse, is a related but broader construct that encompasses research residing outside discourse studies, for example network analysis, information processing, and message flow. Thus a language emphasis distinguishes the discursive from the more general communicative approach. (p. 7)

As language-centric investigation, organizational discourse analyses borrow from a variety of disciplines (Fairclough, 1993; Grant, Hardy, Ostwick, & Putnam, 2004; Grant, Keenoy, & Ostwick, 1998). The theme drawing together discursive organization studies is that “social reality, seen as shared mental schemes or [...] social representations, is thus mainly based upon discursive interaction” (Heracleous, 2004, p. 178). The sharing, dissemination, and imposition of those mental schemes and representation takes place on a number of levels. We may speak of *discourse* in the singular, as “language use conceived as social practice,” or in the plural form, *discourses*, as the variety of “[ways] of signifying experience from a particular perspective” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 138). In this study, I am studying the language-related social practices of a specific group of people. The Office of Sustainability exhibits creative use of discourse in the service of sustainability. Put another way, they participate in sustainability discourses.

Fairclough (1992, 1995) has posited that discourses operate simultaneously in at least three different dimensions. All discourse is constructed through human activity in these dimensions. The first is the dimension of the *text*, where texts are “any product whether written or spoken” (Fairclough, 1992, p. 4). OS staff and volunteers produce an array of texts, from websites, to strategic plans, to policies, and more. One purpose of this study is to create a public text of the processes that contribute to the creation of these texts—their back-story, if you will.

The second dimension of discourse is *discursive practice*. Seen as a practice, discourse is an improvisation carried out by people as they produce and interpret texts. For instance, I sat in on a meeting with the dean of a college, a consultant to Intermountain West University (IWU), and Russell Snyder. The three met to consider how the college might take advantage of the completion of a new building to conserve energy. In this conversation, the participants shared ideas, concerns, and arguments for a variety of proposals. In this interaction, the participants *practiced* discourse by citing established texts, interpreting some, seeking to establish new ones according to the objective of making the college's stakeholders work within the buildings "more sustainable."

The third dimension of the three-dimensional approach to discourse is *social practice*. Social practice, in this framework, is distinguished from discursive practice according to "issues of concern in social analysis such as the institutional and organizational circumstances of the discursive event and how that shapes the nature of the discursive practice" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 4). In other words, people's discursive practices must always draw from and contribute to contexts in which they act. For example, talking about sustainability in any organizational context usually brings one into a discussion of economics. A standard argument made by sustainability advocates at IWU was that the pricing of environmentally friendly projects was usually not appropriate. The advocates called for "lifecycle costing," in which consumers take into account the up-front price of a purchased item, its efficiency over the long term, the price of its disposal, and any externalities (which are costs borne by third parties). For instance, using talk about lifecycle costs, sustainability advocates sought to reframe solar

power as “cheaper and better” than electricity that the utility company generated by burning coal. Lifecycle costs and costing are social concepts already well established in certain communities; the employees of the OS were not inventing the term and its implications. In this way, their discourse involved social practice, meaning the appropriation and alteration of institutionalized languages and resources.

Thus, the domain of discourse, which I treat as a subsidiary of communication, is three-dimensional. Discourse involves human texts, discursive practices, and social practices. Fairhurst and Putnam (2004) treat the three dimensions in this way:

For many organizational analysts, discourse embodies cultural meanings that enable the social and communicative; discourse is a medium for social interaction (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Hence, the study of language in use and interaction process is the focus of discourse analysts. For others, discourse refers to forms of talk and social texts that are loosely coupled from meaning and relatively autonomous from communicative processes. (p. 7)

In the course of my research, I examined texts, discursive practices, and social practices implicated in sustainability organizing by the members of the Office of Sustainability.

Rhetoric

According to Bryant (1953), “The rhetorical function [of language] is a function of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas” (p. 413). By this, Bryant meant both that rhetoric involves “the management of discourse in specific situations for practical purposes” and that “it touches the art of informing ideas, and the functioning of language” (p. 424). Scholars have argued that “a rhetorical view of organizational discourse [...] focuses on the *strategic possibilities of discourse in action*” (Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004, p. 85, emphasis in original). The focus on strategy is important and central to the way I will define the term in the remainder of this

document. Rhetoric is language and other symbols used purposively in the service of influence. I will define rhetoric as “the art of using symbols to persuade others to change their attitudes, beliefs, values or actions” (Cheney, et al., p. 79).¹

This study is a study *of rhetoric* inasmuch as I am interested in the study participants’ *communication about rhetoric*. Rhetorically-oriented researchers have investigated topics as diverse as organizations’ public talk about ethics (e.g., Cheney & Frenette, 1993), corporate representatives’ representation of a crisis (e.g., Conrad, 2004; Crable & Vibbert, 1983; Heath, 1990), the personification of corporations (e.g., Cheney, 1992; Livesey & Kearins, 2002), and more (for reviews of the literature, see Cheney, 2005; Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2006). Most of these perspectives on organizational rhetoric focus on public communication or seemingly finished texts intended for broad consumption (cf. McGee, 1990). “However,” Cheney and McMillan (1990) point out, “public, representative pronouncements do not necessarily reflect the range of rhetorical activities by, for, and within organizations” (p. 102). My emphasis is not upon the completed texts produced by OS stakeholders. While I do consider some published and recorded works authored by Office stakeholders—a few of which I helped to author or revise—I am more interested in the way the production of these texts plays in to the everyday discursive practices of people who call themselves “sustainability advocates.”

I think such a perspective on rhetoric “has much to offer those interested in how groups of individuals come to see strategic alternatives in ways compatible enough to allow collective action” (Huff, 1983, p. 168). That is the case because, as Cheney (2005) argues, “The more traditional rhetorical concepts informing what I’d call a ‘rhetorical

sensibility' are valuable above all for their recognition of how *discourse links individual persuasive choices with organizational resources*" (p. 68, emphasis in original). This is a significant contribution because few studies of (organizational) rhetoric utilize ethnographic and interviewing techniques to (1) represent voices silenced in or absent from official texts, and (2) assess the processes that *serve to construct* rhetorical artifacts and situations (see Clair, 1993, 1998; Endres, 2009b, Pezzullo, 2003; Senda-Cook, 2010).

Sustainability: An Ideograph

My study simultaneously deals with discursive and rhetorical practice. One communication concept that suits this duality is the ideograph. McGee (1980a) offered the most classic definition:

An ideograph is an ordinary-language term found in political discourse. It is a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular but equivocal and ill-defined normative goal. It warrants the use of power, excuses behavior and belief which might otherwise be perceived as eccentric or antisocial, and guides behavior and belief into channels easily recognized by a community as acceptable and laudable. (p. 15)

For the OS and IWU, as for other organizations, sustainability is such a term. Thus, my study concerns the ideograph "sustainability" and rhetorical attempts to legitimate discourse about it at IWU. The social function of ideographs change over time, and ideographs' meanings are struggled over by groups in order gain power (Condit & Lucaities, 1993). In this case, I follow the ways in which *communication of and for sustainability* is negotiated, muted, and put into play for the purpose of changing an organization and making sense of persuasion toward that end.

Perspective on Organizations and Organizing

Since what has been labeled the interpretive turn in the field, organizational communication has taken on “the organization,” itself, as a central problematic (Mumby & Stohl, 1996). This means that organizational communication research is distinguished in part by the investigation of what it means to organize or be organized in the first place. This dissertation takes up an interpretive position on organizational communication. As such, I treat communication as an *organizing activity*.²

I will use Cheney’s (1991) definition of organization. He writes, “Organization, generally speaking, is the coordination of individual interests; it is the mobilization of energies (symbolic and material) toward selective goals and values, including the value of organization *in itself* and the goal of its maintenance” (p. 19, emphasis in original). I adopt his definition for three reasons. First, I think it is sufficiently ambiguous. The Office of Sustainability has three employees, but a great many volunteers, partners, and other stakeholders working in its behalf on particular initiatives and over the long term. The OS organizes the energies of these many people. Still, it may not appear as expansive and complex to someone simply looking for the formal boundaries and location of the Office within the structure of IWU. Second, Cheney’s definition recognizes that an organization is more active than static. Weick (1979) famously proposes that organization theorists study *organizing* instead of *organizations*, which is the perspective I adopt for this study. Third, Cheney’s definition is appropriate because it emphasizes that organizing involves the *selection* of goals and values, which requires advocacy.

Summary

This is a study of a specific case of sustainability-related discourse. Contributors to the Office of Sustainability participate in that discourse, by which I mean they (1) produce and interpret texts, (2) engage in discursive practices, and (3) use language that connects with broader patterns of social change. I train my attention on a specific *discursive* practice: lay theorizing. In terms of content, I focus my investigation on lay theorizing about three different dimensions of communication—advocacy, voice, and ethics—as they relate to the topics of sustainability and organizational change.

A New Perspective on Lay Theory and Theorizing

In this section, I synthesize treatments of lay theory in social psychology, organization studies, and communication studies. Ultimately, I forge a new perspective on this area of interest. As Garfinkel (1967) puts it:

The *recognizedly* rational properties of [members'] common sense inquiries—their recognizedly consistent, or methodic, or uniform, or planful, etc. character—are *somehow* attainments of members concerted activities. For Suicide Prevention Center staff, for coders, for jurors the rational properties of their practical inquiries somehow consist in the concerted work of making evident from fragments, from proverbs, from passing remarks, from rumors, from a partial descriptions, from “codified” but essentially vague categories of experience and the like [...] *Somehow* is the problematic crux of the matter. (p. 10, emphasis in original)

In this study, I focus on the “somehow” of participants’ lay theorizing about sustainability, persuasion, and organizing.

In the subsections that follow, I first define theories and lay theorizing in communication-related terms. Second, I compare communication-centered perspectives on lay theory to those from sociology and psychology. Third, I discuss important issues suggested by my definition of lay theory. Finally, I explain how the approach to lay

theory I develop here is similar to but distinct from other frameworks in communication and organization studies.

Communication and Lay Theory

Theories are *knowledge claims*. Lay theories are no exception; they too are knowledge claims. Because they are *claims*, lay theories are connected to discourse. In other words, theories are *made up of* and *realized in* communication. Thus, lay theories are not simply phenomena in individuals' minds, but *are properties of social collectives*, of people in conversation with one another. I focus on the communicative dimensions of lay theories and lay theorizing, rather than their psychological and sociological dimensions. Lay theories are most commonly treated as psychological phenomena (Furnham, 1988; Kruglanski, 1989). However, lay theories are social in nature and they are made practical in communication. In Weick's (1983) terms, lay theorizing is people "acting thinkingly" with discourse.

Thagard (1984) distinguishes theories from other types of claims: "A theory is a definition of a kind of system, claimed to apply to real systems" (p. 82). To *define* a system is to make a claim about its meaning or nature. Deetz (1992) points out that although theories provide definitions, they are best recognized as *conceptions* that "[specify] a point of view, a way of seeing and talking" (p. 74). Because they are knowledge claims, theories (lay and nonlay alike) usually show up in communication as definitional, descriptive, or evaluative statements, but they are always already conceptions (cf. Mills, 1940). I want to stress that this definition of lay theory should be treated differently than definitions applied to so-called formal or scientific theories. As Redding (1992) cautioned, "The word 'theory,' a notoriously elastic term, should not be

interpreted so rigidly as to include only the ‘classical’ (hypothetical-deductive or variable-analytic) model” (p. 92).

As claim making, lay theorizing may involve *argument*. Brockriede (1974) defines argument as “the process whereby a person reasons his [or her] way from one idea to the choice of another” (p. 166). Theorizers and others *may* experience lay theorizing as argumentation. However, there are at least two characteristics of lay theorizing, qua discursive practice, that minimize the likelihood that people will experience lay theorizing as an essentially argumentative activity.

First, lay theorizing is usually *enthymematic* (Furnham, 1988; Thompson, Kruglanski, & Spiegel, 2000). Put succinctly, “Enthymemes are rhetorical structures of argumentation” (Heracleous, 2004, p. 183). While syllogisms are logical arguments in which premises are expressed, enthymemes’ premises (or at least some of them) are left unexpressed. Strong enthymematic rhetoric involves premises that are shared or taken for granted by the audience. Importantly, sharing premises and communicating based upon premises facilitates claim making (see Cheney, et al. [2004, p. 42] for a discussion of enthymeme as a “shorthand definition” that relies upon context and generates a sense of organizational rationality). A good example from my research comes in the common expression of an ideal sustainable university as one where members are “interconnected” and “collaborative,” and in which people work less in “their silos” (e.g., academic departments, operational units with narrowly-defined missions).³ The subsumed premises in this enthymematic theory of an ecologically sustainable university may take a number of forms. One premise is that collaborative decision making will lead to prioritization of environmental goals. Another assumption built into expressions of this kind: A greater

number of connections between people makes for a more effective organizational system.⁴ In any case, the *kind* of interconnection is specified only sometimes and the term collaboration is very rarely defined when it is used. This example demonstrates how lay theories function as definitions of a system expressed in shorthand language.⁵

The second reason people may fail to think of lay theorizing as conceptual and argumentative is that an individual *doing lay theorizing* may fail to recognize the premises subsumed in their enthymematic argument at all. This is an important point for understanding lay theorizing as a discursive practice. For, enthymemes “are not necessarily consciously evoked, [because they are] located in actors’ practical consciousness rather than discursive consciousness (Giddens, 1984, pp. 44-45)” (Heracleous, 2004, p. 183). As definitional claim making, lay theorizing may *naturalize* the system or system conditions being defined. That is, lay theorists may “[treat] the socially produced as given in nature [and] one view of the subject matter [...] as the way the thing is” (Deetz, 1992, p. 190).⁶ As such, it is important for the analyst as well as the practitioner to assess lay theorizing with reference to the contextual factors that shape how actors understand what is being “done” with lay theories. The point here is that lay theories are *arguments about* reality, though they may not ostensibly take that form in actors’ perceptions and language.

Comparing and Contrasting Various Perspectives on Lay Theory

I have defined lay theories as knowledge claims and will examine lay theorizing as a discursive practice. Below, I present a communication-centric perspective on lay theorizing that is built around this definition. First, however, I briefly characterize and comment upon sociological and psychological perspectives on lay theory.

Sociological perspectives on lay theory. Sociological approaches center on the collective *sharing* of lay theories regarding some phenomenon or set of phenomena. Potter and Wetherell (1987) explain that this perspective coheres around the assumption that “social groups are constituted by their shared social representations” (p. 142). There is a puzzle here. Are social collectives naturally occurring groups that “have” shared social representations, or does the social group emerge through consistent representation? Potter and Wetherell point out that, either way, this perspective unduly foregrounds the roles of consensus and consistency, and backgrounds the place of dissensus and inconsistency within and between social groups.

Most writers define lay theories by what they are not. Specifically, scholars regularly claim that lay theories are not developed by professionals working in their area of expertise according to scientific methods of inquiry and knowledge development (Furnham, 1988).⁷ Scholars usually define lay theories according to their supposed counterpart, scientific or professional theories. This bifurcation of theory types rests upon the distinction of the theorizer’s social group membership—scientific and/or professional versus lay.⁸ This is important because, “the shared interests and tight language structure of technical discussion” makes the comparison and adjudication of *formal* knowledge claims more easy in scientific and professional communities (Railsback, 1983, p. 363). Despite that fact, lay and scientific/professional theory intersect in both social and technical arenas (Giddens, 1979; Goodnight, 1982), especially on issues connected to the natural world (Endres, 2009a; Kinsella, 2004). A communication-based definition would not focus on the class or social category of the theorizer, but rather on the symbolic effort necessary to legitimate a theory *as a so-*

called lay theory. From this point of view, as opposed to what I am very broadly calling the sociological perspective, it should be clear that the term lay theory is a “claim-bearing label” (see Hilhorst, 2003).

The argument I am making is analogous to some organizational culture scholars’ argument that culture is not so much something organizations “have” as it is something organizations “are.” An associated thesis is that organizations are not characterized by a singular culture, but by the struggle over cultural representation in the first place, despite widespread acceptance of phrases like “an organization’s culture” (Smircich, 1983). While it may be the case that organization members propound similar theories of one thing or another, it can be misleading to say either that the commonality constitutes the group, or that group membership is determined by the sharing of a theory. Baxter (1993), for example, studied “cultural codes” in the debate over governance at an academic institution, defining “a code of communication in its general sense [as] a coherent system of symbols, meanings, and beliefs and normative rules about communication (Philipsen, 1992)” (p. 314). While she couches the study as an interpretive ethnography of multiple voices within an organization, she seems at times to reify membership *in* communication codes. She speaks of “code members” (see, e.g., p. 317) and code “subcultures” (see p. 325), but also “code users” (see pp. 318-319). I believe that the last characterization, code *users*, is more appropriate for a communication-based take on such activity. Still, Baxter neatly divides the two codes identified in her research, which provides for cogent analysis but scant attention to diversity within the codes, overlap between the codes, and complexity in the *uses of codes*. Instead, she speaks simultaneously of the code *as the*

group and *as the communication system*. From a communication perspective, it is less than ideal to assume a one-to-one correspondence between the two.

Psychological perspectives on lay theory. Lay theory is a concept that has its roots in psychology, particularly in the study of attitudes (Furnham, 1988). Kruglanski's (1989) theory of lay epistemics deals specifically with the nature of people's attitudes, "a special type of knowledge, notably knowledge of which content is evaluative or affective" (p. 139). Note his focus on *content* of knowledge, rather than the language in which the knowledge is formed. There are untold numbers of definitions for attitudes in organization studies (see Brief, 1998, for a review), and Potter and Wetherell (1987) suggest that this is at least in part the case because social psychologists describe attitudes as structures of the *mind*, though they study them through actors' *language use* and other *behaviors*. In place of the mental construct *attitudes*, Deetz (1992) notes that *theories* do three things: direct attention, organize experience, and enable useful responses (pp. 71-77). These are communicational dimensions of theories, and they are suitable substitutes for the attitude concept, which is too grounded for my purposes in theories of individual cognition and mind.

Cheney (2002), for instance, examined the struggle over "democracy" at the Mondragón worker cooperatives in the Basque Country in Spain. His study provides a good example of a communication-based alternative to psychological claims about lay theory. Organizational democracy may be read, Cheney suggests, as a hindrance to competitiveness in the "new global economy," as a crucial part of the tradition and "soul" of the cooperative system, as a "Trojan horse" for increased management pressure and control, and more. Indeed, Mondragón employees interviewed by Cheney

talked of democracy as it was practiced in their organization through multiple frames. Their theories of what democracy is and ought to be for the cooperatives could be thought of as involving personal and collective attitudes. Importantly, Cheney chooses to focus on discourse, and upon rhetoric in particular. The key is that Mondragón workers' talk about democracy *organized their experiences*; it motivated attention toward the matter of democracy and involved certain dispositions toward the meaning of democracy. It is reasonable to call these attitudes toward democracy, but I prefer to conceive of the claims about democracy that Cheney documents *as rhetoric* (as Cheney does) and thus as meaning making that advocates for particular perspectives on the matter at hand.

A Communication-Centered Perspective on Lay Theory

The communication-oriented perspective that I advocate draws upon some of the premises of ethnomethodology. Garfinkel (1967), who offered the first systematic explication of ethnomethodology, presented scholars with this guiding maxim: “The activities whereby members [of social groups] produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members’ procedures for making those settings ‘account-able’” (p. 1). In other words, activities are *the social processes of making sense* of collaborative action. From this perspective, an activity is *organized* in that people produce mutually sensible procedures for interacting. Thus, activity and knowledge are accomplished, rather than being an unproblematic fact of life. As such, ethnomethodologists study “the rational accountability of practical actions as an ongoing, practical accomplishment” (Garfinkel, p. 4). Lay theories *of communication* are one way in which these practical accomplishments are realized. I will draw upon Craig’s (1999)

definition of lay theories *of communication*, in particular: “commonplaces of *practical metadiscourse*—such as the commonplace belief that people ordinarily understand each other’s utterances” (p. 128, emphasis in original).

Organization scholars use ethnomethodology to conceptualize the “detailed and specifiable processes of producing orders based on shared methods, trust, competence, and attention” in work settings (Rawls, 2008, p. 702). Recently, scholars have used this approach to detail how dimensions of organizational life such as gender (Acker, 1990; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; West & Zimmerman, 1987) and knowledge (Kuhn & Jackson, 2008; Rawls) are constituted *within* organizational environments *through* communication. In turn, these accomplished constructs shape people’s understanding of (the) organization, itself.

Accordingly, lay theories are one means by which people cooperate in *creating* realities and *negotiating* what we might call the established realities of organizational life. Lay theorizing involves more than simply an individual “trying to understand what is out there.” Instead, this perspective presumes that “mutual understanding [...] requires constant mutual orientation to situated constitutive expectancies—taken-for-granted methods of producing order that constitute sense” (Rawls, 2008, p. 701).

The ethnomethodological perspective outlined above helps to explain this example. It is not the case that the OS merely helps IWU “reach” sustainability. Instead, it struggles to fold “sustainability” into the everyday “sensibility” of work at IWU. It was taken-for-granted that “rational” action on sustainability required explicit methods for gathering quantitative data. Still, many, many times during my fieldwork and in ethnographic interviews, I heard people say things like “we need to follow the data” or

“we need to decide based on the data.” And so, the OS goes about creating data sets such as the annual GHG inventories. Yet, because other organizations within IWU system do not create knowledge of the university with reference to sustainability, the data required to make the inventory do not exist. Thus, the OS’s advocacy for “rational action” on climate change-relevant issues is made problematic. First, the existing system did not value or assess sustainability at IWU, so it did not gather all data required for measuring or meeting sustainability goals (for discursive and institutional explanations, see e.g., Fairclough & Thomas, 2004; Orssatto & Clegg, 1999). Second, the procedures for gathering certain data and making certain knowledge claims are well established. Thus, Office supporters have a hard time challenging the notion that administrators are not seeing the whole picture, so to speak.⁹ And so, third, OS actors struggle simultaneously to (1) appropriately guess about the required data, and (2) create new procedures and symbolic contexts for collecting heretofore nonexistent data—procedures that nonetheless must approximate or simulate the old means of making and using data.

However, ethnomethodology is concerned almost entirely with “accomplishment” as the realization of cooperation and coordination. This perspective pays somewhat less attention to tension, contradiction, multiplicity, and the like. The recognition of the *disorganization* of organizational life has a long history organizational communication scholarship but has garnered significant attention recently (e.g., Ashcraft 2006, Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004; Harter, 2004; Harter & Krone, 2001; Jian, 2007; Putnam, 1986; Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Tracy, 2004; Trethewey & Aschcraft, 2004). This approach challenges the presumption in ethnomethodology that organization is a *characteristic* of everyday interaction. That is, the ethnomethodological perspectives outlined above

dispose researchers to see “the organization” in the *organizing properties of everyday talk* more than its inconsistent or polyvalent features.

Scholars dealing with organizational and social change have suggested that *dialectics* are a useful concept for understanding the ways in which organizations embody regularity and irregularity, the common and the uncommon (e.g., Harter & Krone, 2001; Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that dialectical thinking about communication should not be treated as a unified theory of communication, but rather as “a small set of conceptual assumptions” about symbolic interaction (p. 6). Dialectical thinking attunes the researcher to contradictions, which are the “dynamic interplay between unified oppositions” (p. 8).

For instance, the notion of a *sustainable organizational* ideal requires one to assume that the present form is somehow *unsustainable*. There is no sustainability without its opposite. This, I’ve found in my fieldwork, is a particular challenge for the OS. They strive to label particular initiatives, objects, and aspirations as sustainable, and the result is somewhat piecemeal. The solar panels on that building are sustainable; using a universal power strip to shut down all of your office’s electronics at the end of the day is a sustainable behavior; the plans for a “net-zero water campus” are sustainable. There are two points of contradiction. First, these efforts exist in a *system* that the OS treats as unsustainable. I am willing to conjecture that none of the active participants in my project would claim that IWU is, at present, a sustainable organization according to any definition. Second, and moreover, sustainability advocates at IWU usually claim that achieving sustainable organization requires systems thinking *and* they simultaneously claim that sustainability needs to be made personal, immediate, or concrete. These

assertions are related to the labeling practices I mentioned at the beginning of this example, where singular things, rather than systems, are assigned the label “sustainable” in order to make sense of sustainability in the present. These tensions are *required*, I believe, for people to successfully *navigate and induce* environment-related organizational changes.

I have argued that a communication-centered perspective on lay theorizing must attend to the communicative production of consonance, commonality, and routine practices on one hand, and of dissonance, fragmentation, and uncustomary practices on another. To build that perspective, I turn to Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) concept of “interpretive repertoires” (IRs). The IR concept has received limited attention in organization studies. These two authors developed the concept to describe the *sociality* of discursive activity without assuming “a one-to-one concordance with group boundaries, and [... without deploying] the type of speculative cognitive psychology which underlies social representation theory” (p. 146).

Interpretive repertoires. The study of IRs is grounded in a “discourse approach,” which “shifts the focus from a search for underlying entities—attitudes—which generate talk and behavior to a detailed examination of how evaluative expressions are produced in discourse” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 55). Primary attention is given to “the situated flow of discourse [... and] is concerned with [people’s] methods and the logic of accountability while describing also the collective and social patterning of background normative conceptions” (Wetherell, 1998, p. 405). At the center of research in this tradition are questions about *how* and *with what social connections/consequences* people

take up positions and make claims with language. Potter and Wetherell (1987) provide the following definition:

Interpretative repertoires are recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena. A repertoire [...] is constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes). (p. 149)

Elsewhere, they substitute the words “lexicon or register” for “system” (p. 138).

IRs are resources for understanding (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Scholars have explored the means by which rhetoric shapes understanding (Scott, 1967) and orients people toward knowledge of reality (Railsback, 1983). IRs are rhetorical because people utilize them in support of tenuous claims (Milne, 2009). Compelling claims draw upon IRs in ways that are “practically adequate” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 31), meaning that they are suitable for the situation at hand, which typifies rhetorical language (Heracleous, 2004; Cheney, et al., 2004). Of course, people do not simply use IRs as a tool, since the availability or legitimacy of language used to make explanatory accounts is subject to historical and institutional constraint (Milne). Put simply, history and culture matter (Wetherell & Potter, 1992). Nonetheless, it should be clear by now that IR analysis is antideterministic and treats people as creative, if constrained, agents (Wetherell, 1998).

IR analysis can account for both similarity and variation in people’s discourse use, where studies of lay theory, attitudes, codes, and such often look for patterns primarily in terms of consistency or commonality (McKenzie, 2005). In other words, variation within and across accounts is not seen as out of the ordinary for IRs, but characteristic of their use *as language forms*. This is true for the study of IRs because the

concept's "concern is firmly with language use" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 157). "Contingency, precariousness and openness arise in part because utterances are designed to do interactional tasks and do not thereby entail descriptive closure and cognitive consistency" (Wetherell, 1998, p. 401). On one hand, individuals may present inconsistent or contradictory explanative accounts at any given moment, and always draw from an "'ensemble' of subject positions" (Wetherell, p. 404). The point is not to pursue how this affects or is affected by group memberships, or to point to some trouble with the individual's thinking, *per se*. Instead, the consistency and contradiction may be investigated in terms of how they play out in the use of language. On another hand, individuals may draw upon different IRs to make different claims, to make claims to different audiences, or to make arguments under different conditions. IR analysis treats this as a normal aspect of communication, since IRs are "used to perform different sorts of accounting tasks" (Potter & Wetherell, p. 156). To sum, the study of IRs should not be driven by a reductionist search for constant, regularized language use, although patterned talk is an element of IRs. Some collectives—successful "high reliability organizations" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007), for example—may exhibit consistent use of a very limited number of IRs. Nevertheless, IR analysts following Potter and Wetherell's vision recognize that people draw from a variety of IRs, in a variety of contexts, with varying degrees of reflexive awareness.

Connecting lay theories and interpretive repertoires. Lay theories are, at base, statements of some sort that do definitional-conceptual work. They are reliant upon context for their meaning in every case (Draper, 1988). IRs are "recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149). Thus, lay theories

are *definitions of* systems, while IRs *are* systems. I argue that lay theories contribute to and are drawn from IRs. Using the language of structuration theory, I characterize the relationship as *recursive* (Banks & Riley, 1993; Heracleous & Barrett, 2001; Giddens, 1984; Poole & McPhee, 1983). Drawing from its meaning in ethnomethodology, I characterize people's actions within and upon these systems as reflexive. In other words, IRs provide a *productive* structure for making theoretical claims and agents theorize in *practical* ways that also affect the structural possibilities of IRs. IRs are "modalities" that mediate social structures the relationship between social structures and communicative actions (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000; Heracleous & Barrett; Mueller, Sillince, Harvey, & Howorth, 2004). It is important to point out that some interpretive possibilities/resources are relatively prefigured for organization members while others are continually changing (Koch & Deetz, 1981, p. 3).¹⁰

An excellent example of this comes from what is often called the contemporary climate change debate. Scientific theory now overwhelmingly acknowledges that human activity has the capacity to alter global climatic patterns, dubbed "anthropogenic climate change," and that such change is currently underway. In nontechnical spheres, there remains serious contention as to whether anthropogenic climate change is *real*, let alone whether or not it is a *crisis* (i.e., an "imperfection marked by urgency" [see Bitzer, 1968]). These contests are marked by innumerable lay theories about climate change and possible human responses. People engage in lay theorizing with resources available in IRs. As such, it is reasonable to suppose that people stridently working to mitigate anthropogenic climate change might draw on repertoires that cohere around particular jeremiadic or apocalyptic themes and images (Opie & Elliot, 1996; Wolfe, 2008), balance

and harmony metaphors (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1992; Zizek, 2009), and certain socio-economic ideologies (Kendall, 2008). Collections of these themes, metaphors, and ideological pronouncements constitute the system (i.e., the IR) that grounds knowledge claims such as, “The Earth’s climate is warming at an alarming rate; humans are responsible for this; we must come into balance with nature and find sources other than fossil fuels for fueling global economic development or face catastrophe.”

From a communication-based perspective, lay theories are the language-based artifacts of lay theorizing, which is a discursive practice. Importantly, theories and theorizing involve “global” discourses; they employ the language of systems and wholes, and they are tightly coupled to meaning. By that, I mean people use lay theories to make the reasoning process, itself, meaningful (see Sillince, 2007). Individuals and collectives may draw from a number of IRs at once in order to craft their espoused lay theories. Ultimately, the “quality” of lay theorizing, for the theorizer and their audience, is judged in terms of its *practical adequacy*. Thus, communication-centered analysis of lay theorization and IRs should:

- subtly trace lay theories and IRs at play in a given case,
- foreground (or at least pay attention to) the actors’ perspectives,
- show how people make lay theories and IRs practically adequate,
- assess the social consequences of lay theories and IRs in use,
- and, perhaps, suggest new repertoires and practices in order to address those social consequences.

Brief Notes on Knowing, Power, and Metalanguage

The discussion above invites brief commentary on three broad topics related to my approach to lay theories and IRs. First, I say more about contemporary approaches to organizational knowing that draw from ethnomethodological premises. Second, I discuss the place of power in any discussion of lay theory. Third, I explain why lay or nonlay theories of communication must involve some sort of metalanguage. Together, these three short discussions round out my approach to lay theorizing as a definitional-conceptual practice that is accomplished through the complex utilization of IRs.

On organizational knowing. As outlined above lay theorizing contributes to the accomplishment of knowledge by drawing from, establishing, and/or participating in routines for sharing, verifying, and using information in organizational systems (Kuhn & Jackson, 2008). In order to be recognized as *organized*, a human system must also be *explained* in some way (Pye, 1993). This perspective

assumes that knowing precedes knowledge, both logically and chronologically, for the latter is always an institutionalized version of the former [...] such [that] knowledge is thus acquired through some form of participation, and it is continually reproduced and negotiated; that is, it is always dynamic and provisional. (Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003, p. 3)

Garfinkel points out that nonacademics usually talk about knowledge as “coming to terms with a situation” as it really is (p. 96). Actually, people must always “[assemble] and make available for use” arguments that warrant particular interpretations and actions (p. 96). As such, the *form of participation* (i.e., organizational knowing) creates the sense of established reality in/of the context (i.e, organizational knowledge). How communication is practiced in an organization and the beliefs about communication that inform those practices will, ultimately, shape how people (may) participate in

knowledge-constituting practices (Deetz, 1995). To see knowledge as an *accomplishment* grounded in processes of *knowing* requires an understanding that communication is “always incomplete and partial, and the reason [any person talks] to others is to better understand what I and they mean, hoping to find new and more satisfying ways of being together” (Deetz, pp. 97-98).

A dialectical tension exists in this perspective on knowledge. To engender “expert” knowing, collectives must develop common and relatively stable processes by which knowledge is established. Yet, the collective must also empower members understanding of the knowing process, itself—at least, that is, to the extent that the collective can be flexible (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008) and viable during conditions of change (Harter & Krone, 2001).¹¹ This back-and-forth process is how people use communication to *come to know*. While it is tempting to think about lay theorizing as representations of static knowledge, it is better to conceptualize theorizing as a *process of knowing*, meaning that it is subject to change and negotiation.¹²

On power. Deetz (1992) writes, “There is a politics *within* the production of knowledge” (p. 77, emphasis in original). For Foucault (1980), power “produces effects at the level of desire—and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it” (p. 59). As it is *productive*, power shapes (but does not necessarily determine) how people constitute organization through discourse, as well as how people act and who people may be in organizational environments (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). The effects of power may be seen in people’s resistance to it, reticence to voice opposition, or failure to perceive or understand alternatives to the status quo

(Lukes, 1974). We should treat lay theorizing as a *constructive* activity rather than a *representative* one. For that reason, power is always a relevant issue.

On metalanguage. Lay theorizing, as a discursive phenomenon, involves the development of shared language and other modes of representation. As I demonstrated above, power defines what may and may not be legitimate knowledge, perpetuates tacit knowledge, and influences interpretation. Scholars have analyzed the effects of power on people's interpretation and use of narratives (e.g., Brown & McMillan, 1991; Mumby, 1987), root metaphors (e.g., Smith & Eisenberg, 1987), meetings and other rituals (e.g., Schwartzman, 1989; Trujillo, 1992). In studies like these, discourse is assumed to, in part, constitute organization. However, I examine a case of the struggle to create metalanguages, or talk *about* discursive practices (not just *of* discursive practices, if you will).

It is on this final point that I want to stress the significance of lay theorizing about communication. Communicative activity is a *medium* in which people (re)formulate, express, and share their everyday knowledge. Simultaneously, it is *subject to* theorization. In particular, people both think about and think with discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). As such, lay theories of communication take form in metalanguage, or talk about talk. Radford (2005) argues, "To understand communication, we must understand the *language of communication* and the genuine conversations in which such language is created and used" (p. 176, emphasis in original).¹³

Of course, the language of lay theorizing need not be consistent, formal, or contradiction free. In fact, it is usually the case that people's knowledge claims are audience-specific and self-contradicting both in the moment and across time (Furnham,

1988), especially in organizational settings (Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2008). It is less interesting to investigate whether

[...] communication is valid, testable, reliable, misleading, has effects, or can change behaviors. [...] In a sense, it is already known that communication exists because it exists in and through the discourse that sustains it. The question becomes the discourse itself. (Radford, 2005, p. 9)

Related Concepts

In many ways, the approach to lay theorizing that I have outlined here parallels scholarship on related and better-established concepts in organizational communication scholarship. In the following pages, I briefly comment upon research and theory dealing with (1) accounts and narratives, (2) metaphors, (3) discursive frames/framing, and (4) sensemaking in order to highlight the ways in which that work is related to this study.

Accounts and narratives. The study of accounts has its roots largely, but not entirely, in language-focused social science (Burke, 1969a, 1969b; Haaré & Secord, 1973, Mills, 1940), and that work has been appropriated in organization studies (e.g., Staw, 1980; Tompkins & Cheney, 1983). Accounts are “the actor’s statement about why he or she performed certain acts and what social meaning he or she gave to the actions of himself or herself and others” (Tompkins & Cheney, p. 129). Such statements are *justifications that are occasioned*. In other words, accounts offered when called forth or believed to be expected by others. Importantly, accounts often supply accounts in “local” context (Sillince, 2007), which means that they inform of who someone thinks they are or whom they desire to be seen as. We might say that accounts offer responses to questions like, “Just whom do you think you are to do such a thing?” The study of IRs *is* the study of explanative talk (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). However, IR analysis is not

bound to explaining a central theme or set of themes in given accounts. Potter and Wetherell's research described the fragmentation and diversity involved when people explain things, and their concept applied to explanation beyond justifications and excuses for unusual behavior (see Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

Fisher (1984) argued that narration and narrative is the *ontology* of human existence: people exist qua people through stories (cf. Geertz's [1973] "webs of significance"). Some have adopted this foundation for understanding organizing and organizations (e.g., Boje, 1991; Brown, 1990; Browning, 1992; Mumby, 1987; Weick & Browning, 1986). People are said to go beyond simply portraying the organization in stories. Instead, stories give life to organizations by providing narrative arc, and positioning people as characters within the narrative. Moreover, some narratives acquire mythic status. That is, a particular storyline can achieve widespread acceptance as a cultural master-frame for phenomena and experiences. By way of example, myths frame the role of organizations, as well as the value of people, in the "new economy" (Cheney, Lair, Ritz, & Kendall, 2010; Cloud, 2001; Nadesan, 2001). Lay theories of communication may guide the performance of stories, and analysts may infer lay theories from the stories told by organization members. However, as definitional work, lay theorizing is not storytelling. Lay theory coheres around global definition-conceptions rather than the narrative form, which construes life according to characters and plotline.

Metaphors and clichés. To speak of an organizational plotline is to use a metaphor, of course. Since Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) foundational work on generative metaphors, organizational communication scholars have appreciated how

metaphors “[serve] as a background from which all choice and persuasion emerge” (Koch & Deetz, 1981). Several works have demonstrated that metaphor operates through visual, imagistic symbolizing, as well as through language (Harrison, 2004; Morgan, 2006). Armenakis and Bedeian (1992) demonstrated the basic epistemological role of metaphor with reference to organizational change, and Smith and Eisenberg (1987) did so with reference to organizational conflict, for example.

Some metaphors, images, and sayings may operate as clichés. Clichéd language and images are expected, stereotypical representations of organizational life, which people can put to use in defense of particular perspectives or interests. Clichés draw upon and reinforce cultural premises, usually in ways that are ironic. For example, Anderson-Gogh, Grey, and Robson (1998) show how the maxim “work hard, play hard” enabled managers to co-opt employees at accountancy firms in increasing productivity by framing (hard) work as play; Mueller, et al. (2004) explain how managerial insistence on “a rounded picture” of organizational performance may, in fact, reinforce decision making practices that are adversarial, partial, and not dialogical.

Putnam and colleagues (Putnam & Boys, 2006; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996) used metaphor as the foundation for reviews of the discipline of organization studies. Their work provides a thorough look at the role of metaphor in organization studies, which is of course beyond the scope of this chapter. It is enough, I think, to say that many organizational communication scholars treat metaphor as the essence of lay epistemology. My emphasis is on lay theorizing and I treat metaphors and metaphoric communication as discursive devices that may be present in participants’ IR use. Indeed, certain root metaphors may *predominate* particular repertoires. The primary lesson of

metaphor analyses in organizational communication for this study is that lay theorizing may frequently be made enthymematic through people's use of figurative discourse. In some cases—or, perhaps, most cases—metaphors will serve as a kind of shorthand that provides a truncated metalanguage for lay theorizing.

Discursive frames. Tversky and Kahneman (1981) introduced the notion of framing to psychology, defining “decision frames [as ...] the decision-maker's conception of the acts, outcomes, and contingencies associated with a particular choice” (p. 453). They described how the language *about* a choice influenced individual's perception of and action based upon the scenario. As psychologists, they treated frames as mental constructs. Language-centered scholars have treated frames as features of language, itself. Discursive frames are language constructs that *direct people's attention to particular meanings* in a given context—and, perhaps, even on a given topic across contexts (Lakoff, 2004).

Fairhurst and Sarr (1996) position frames and framing as encompassing concepts; they describe metaphors, narratives, slogans and jargon, and related concepts as *framing techniques*. For them, framing is a discursive practice—and an inevitable one, at that—in which language is consciously used to shape collective thought and forethought. As the first major component of framing processes, language enables collective memory, learning, and meaning making. Thought, the second component of framing, is grounded in attention. Thus, language shapes what people attend to based on particular conceptions of what is salient and important. People utilize discourse to accomplish knowledge. Put another way, people “do thought” with language.

Forethought is the last component of Fairhurst and Sarr's concept of framing, and that concept echoes the discussion of psychological attitudes above.

It may be useful to think about lay theorization as *the framing of thought, itself*. Of course, people may be more or less aware of the frames they employ. In fact, those more cognizant of language's power to shape people's perception and experience are likely more adept at framing situations for others (Fairhurst, 2005; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; O'Keefe, 1988). Lay theorizing, as the making of knowledge claims, provides frames for "how I/we know" as well as "what I/we know." The relationship is reciprocal: People use frames to think, but they (may) also think about frames. Still, as I discussed above, theories may rely entirely on shifting, enthymematic arguments. That is, frames may *speak for themselves* as claims where the premises are entirely implicit and unexplained. It is for this reason that tracking people's utilization of multiple IRs, which may be cohere around different frames, is useful for studying lay theorizing as a flexible, complex, but patterned definitional-conceptual process.

Sensemaking. Thus far, I have made a number of references to the work of Karl Weick without addressing sensemaking directly (see especially Weick, 1969, 1979). The sensemaking concept (and other concepts) offers researchers a unique aesthetic sensibility, insisting that organizations are best thought of as contingent processes of organizing (Eisenberg, 2006; Van Maanen, 1995; Weick, 2004). In any case, the concept of sensemaking is particularly relevant to lay theory and theorizing.

O'Connell (1988) claims that seven features of Weick's theorization of sensemaking make it a unique approach to "words in action" (p. 205): its grounding in identity construction, its retrospective orientation, its enactment of environments, its

social nature, its continuousness, its basis in extracted cues from the present which are related to the past, and its basis in plausibility rather than accuracy. Weick (1995a) argues, “The key distinction is that sensemaking is about the ways people generate what they interpret” (p. 13). Sensemaking takes “the flow of organizational circumstances [and turn them] into words and salient categories” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Others have used the concept to examine organizational phenomena as diverse as work/life interrelationships (Golden, 2009), strategic change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1998), and crisis/disaster (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Mills & Weatherbee, 2006).

Two frames for action provided by Weick are germane to my discussion of lay theorizing. First, Weick (2004) suggests that, from a communication perspective, action is best conceived of as people “acting discursively.” He points out a duality: People are always already “conversing within flux and conversing about flux” (p. 411). In my discussion of metalanguage above, I made the point that, for lay theorizing about communication, discourse is both the medium and subject. Sensemaking proceeds *through* discourse and interaction, and, on occasion, sensemaking is *about* discourse. Second, Weick (1983) has described everyday managerial action as “acting thoughtfully.” This characterization draws upon the principles of ethnomethodology that I outlined above. In this way, theory is an artifact or outcome of sensemaking in Weick’s view. It is a reification—a solidification that often conceals actual processes of *theorizing*, which emerges from the collective need to put things into meaningful order (Weick, 1995b). Resultantly, because sensemaking is ongoing, relying too heavily on established theory

in lay and nonlay groups can impede rather than facilitate creative, competent, and effective action.

Weick's development of the concept of sensemaking is closely related to the perspective I offer on lay theorizing. However, Weick (2001) locates lay theorizing—and a related term, cognitive mapping—as one element of enactment and as just one of many aspects of the whole sensemaking process. As a facet of enactment sequences, lay theories are modified by available meanings/information in the environment. An actor's lay theories then direct perception and action. This direction may be inferred in a person's extra-linguistic action or from their accounts (Weick, 1979, pp. 153-157). As a substantial component whole sensemaking process, Weick (1995a, pp. 121-124) describes theories of action as “vocabularies of coping.” By this, he means that people use theories to punctuate organizational sensemaking. Rather than see theories exhibited in practice as somehow entirely distinct from those manifested in language, Weick (1995a) instructs,

The question then becomes, how seriously do speakers and their close associates take those statements? These are important questions because those statements are potential recipes by which the environment may be shaped, and they are potential filters for what is noticed. (p. 214)

This study responds directly to those questions. As a study of lay theorizing, I am interested both in the discursive construction of theories and in how “speakers and their close associates” make—or, perhaps, fail to make—those statements compelling to one another.

Summary. IRs are systems of discourse in use. Wetherell and Potter (1988) say:

Any particular repertoire is constituted out of a restricted range of terms used in a specific stylistic and grammatical fashion. Commonly these terms are derived

from one or more key metaphors and the presence of a repertoire will often be signaled by certain tropes or figures of speech. (p. 172)

Thus, metaphors may anchor an IR, performing the epistemic function above. Narratives and accounts may be stylized in repetitive ways that reinforce the use of an IR. Frames and framing are concepts that emphasize the ways in which interpretation is always already shaped for actors, at least somewhat. Finally, lay theorizing may be thought of the way in which actors draw upon IRs to cope with the persistent equivocality of sensemaking in organizations. These are concepts that might alternately be seen as discursive devices within, overriding, or complementary to the approach I developed above. I prefer the ambiguity of these possible relationships because it allows for adaptation and creativity. I have emphasized *interpretive repertoires* over alternative concepts because of the IR concept's foundation in discourse analysis, and because it allows me to interpret both the content and social uses of lay theories/theorizing.

Transition to Critical Review of Literature

In the first half of this chapter, I sketched a synthetic, interpretive, and communication-centered approach to lay theory and theorizing. I now use that perspective to conduct a review of prominent scholarship on lay theorizing. I have selected academic treatments of lay theory from psychology, organization studies, and communication. I conduct this review in order to demonstrate how, employing this new approach, we might critique and contribute to these works. I observe three dialectics implicit in well-established treatments of people's everyday theories; it is my hope that the framework I provide in this critical review will provide a foundation for *interdisciplinary* discussion of lay theorizing.

I should mention that the material before this transition will be more prominently featured in later chapters than will the discussion that follows. I believe that this review demonstrates one way to align the perspective I crafted above with extant scholarship on lay theory. In that way, the section that follows applies my unique treatment of lay theory to *scholarly literature* rather than the case study. For that reason and for the sake of clarity in Chapters 6 through 8, what follows will not later receive the same level of emphasis as the perspective developed above. Nonetheless, I have opted to keep the following section in this chapter in order to demonstrate the way in which this dissertation can contribute to scholarly conversations on the topic of lay theory and theorizing.

Dialectics in Discussions of Lay Theory and Theorizing

This section describes several themes in academic discussions of lay theory. I do not review all formal considerations of lay theory in the humanities and social sciences. Instead, I have selected several theories/theorists that feature lay theory prominently in their explanations of communicating and/or organizing.¹⁴ I work with three exemplar discussions of lay theory: Vallacher and Wegner's (1985, 1987) theory of action identification, O'Keefe's (O'Keefe, 1988; O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987) theory of message design logics, and Argyris and colleagues' (Argyris, 1976, 1977, 2003; Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Argyris & Schön, 1974) treatment of organizational theories-in-use and espoused theories of organization. I frame my discussion around three dialectics in the discussion of lay theorizing—the simplicity-complexity dialectic, the knowledge-knowing dialectic, and the implicitness-explicitness dialectic. This approach recognizes

several consistencies in academic treatments of lay theory while preserving the view of lay theorizing, itself, as a complex and contingent undertaking.

I selected these three treatments of lay theory based upon four shared features. First, the work of these authors draws from and contributes to different but overlapping disciplinary traditions. O’Keefe is a scholar of communication studies. Vallacher and Wegner’s disciplinary tradition is social psychology. Argyris’ work with a variety of collaborators contributes to the interdiscipline of organization studies (see Cheney, 2007). Second, each of these scholars and their theories has achieved prominent status in their respective fields of inquiry. While I will not claim that the selected scholars are in any way “representative” of the fields in which they operate, their published works have become touchstones for others’ research. Third, all of these discussions treat lay theory *as social phenomena* and/or lay theorization *as a social process* mediated by symbols. Put another way, *communication* is featured in all of these discussions but it is conceptualized (and emphasized) differently in each. Fourth and finally, I considered the relevance of organizations to these scholars’ approaches to lay theory. That is, they each implicate—again, to greater and lesser degrees—organizing and the creation of “a system of consciously coordinated personal activities or forces” (Barnard, 1938/1968, p. 72).

At this point, I provide very brief introductions to each of the selected approaches to lay theory. Afterward, I conduct a critical review of the three selected approaches.

Introduction to Vallacher and Wegner’s Action Identification Theory

Vallacher and Wegner’s (1984) theory of action identification defines the relationship between social representation and action:

People do seem to develop representations of their action after the fact, but they

also seem capable of planning and directing their action in accord with their cognitive representations. [... Our theory] holds that the relationship between cognitive representations and overt behavior is not unidirectional, but cyclical. Through the intent connection, cognitive representations generate action, and through the reflective connection, new representations of what one is doing can emerge to set the stage for a revised intent connection. (p. 4)

In other words, discourse (i.e., cognitive representations embodied by language and other symbols) allows us to articulate what we wish to do, ought to do, or how we engage in strategic action. Action can also be made sensible after the fact—recall the discussion of Weick’s approach to sensemaking, above.

What is generated and revised is an “act identity,” the cognitive-linguistic representation of behavior. Essentially, an act identity is what we think we are doing (or have done, or will do). Positing an act identity is “action identification,” hence the name of these authors’ theory. Vallacher and Wegner (1987) suggest that “with increasing action experience there is a corresponding increase in action automaticity” (p. 7), by which they mean that, over time, actions’ identities become familiar and more tacit or taken-for-granted.

Vallacher and Wegner do account for change in act identities. The concept of “identification level” is the central means by which they explain change. Action identification and act identities can exist on a low or high level. Low-level identities are basic, often bodily in nature. A person might be describes as *depositing an aluminum can in a bin*. At an intermediate level, a person might account for their behavior as *sorting trash from recyclable material*. The very same behavior may be given a high-level identity, as with the statement, “*I’m doing my part to help the environment.*” Note the abstraction of the third possible act identity: it makes no reference to the physical act of putting an aluminum can into a specific container. This is significant because “variation

in [persons'] level of identification [...] has implications for the form that action control is likely to take" (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987, p. 8).

Vallacher and Wegner's arguments about change in act identification level are too complex to rehash in detail, so I will focus only on the concepts of prepotence, emergence, and maintenance. A prepotent identity is an antecedent identity. The term is a label for an action's meaning that is familiar and affords the actor a subjectively plausible representation of behavior. For example, if called upon to account for what I am doing at the moment, I would likely say, "I am working on my dissertation." This is a relatively abstract, and therefore high-level, act identity. I might have also said that I am typing on a keyboard, writing, or providing exposition on a particular theory. Situations present "stimuli" that prompt individuals to maintain the act identity level, to lower it, or to raise it (see Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, pp. 122-138). Difficult situations or situations that challenge an act identity are hypothesized to result in lowering the prepotent identity. Consider how people colloquially speak of *going back to basics*, which often means taking stock of what it is I am (or we are) actually doing at a very rudimentary level. Of course, people also gain understanding and self-awareness of their actions, as well as develop mastery of relevant skills. As this occurs people employ high-level act identities. Doing so allows them to vest behavior with greater meaning. It also allows for greater variation in actual behavior. A person *raising awareness about sustainability issues* might be pamphleteering, hosting public events, talking with close personal acquaintances about environment-related concerns, lobbying elected officials, or undertaking any number of other activities. Resultantly, the person can maintain the identity in a meaningful way until faced with a particularly disruptive dilemma or

challenge.

Action identification is social, and people are socialized to particular forms of action identification. People are “increasingly held responsible for our actions and so learn to offer public accounts of them. [...] We] clarify our intentions, excuse or justify our misdeeds, point to causes beyond our control, communicate values, and offer evaluations, all through depictions of action.” (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, pp. 18-19). Action identification is *pragmatic* in that “behavior is dependent on, or at least associated with, some form of conscious representation” (p. 19). Vallacher and Wegner, as social psychologists, are more interested in the psychological processes involved than the communication processes. Still, it is clear that communication, as “conscious representation” through symbols, is the means by which action identification is made practicable in social situations.

Introduction to O’Keefe’s Message Design Logics

The basic argument made by proponents of message design logic theory is this:

In general, messages originate in speakers’ representations of situations; that is, messages begin not as abstract message types, but as thoughts that are available for expression. What we call a design logic is a way of thinking about communication situations, selecting thoughts for expression, and modifying expression to meet goals. A design logic is a description of the way thought, transformed as messages, related to desired message outcomes. Hence, we should model differences in message production processes as differences in patterns of thoughts about communication situations and differences in the mapping of thoughts to messages. (O’Keefe, 1997, p. 112)

Put simply, message design logics are lay theories of communication. They are “different fundamental premises in reasoning about communication (O’Keefe, 1988, p. 84). The theory of communication from which people operate will influence their goal setting and message adaptation” (see O’Keefe, 1997, p. 95). It is obvious, she notes, that messages

will differ within and across situations, for both similar and dissimilar people. What is more important is to describe how people's conceptions of communication affect their message choice. Lay theories of communication are evident in "different ways of reasoning from goals to messages [... which challenges the presumption that] alternative message forms [are] derived from the same way of reasoning about communication" (O'Keefe, 1988, p. 83).

O'Keefe (1988) developed a three-tiered classification of message design logics to account for the ways in which individual's theories of communication shape their goal setting and message selection. The three message design logics are expressive, conventional, and rhetorical. "An expressive message design logic reflects a view of communication as a process of expressing and receiving encoded thoughts and feelings" (O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987, p. 71). A conventional logic differs from an expressive logic in that "the conventional view subsumes the expressive premise; language is viewed as a means of expressing propositions, but the propositions one expresses are specified by the social effect one wants to achieve rather than the thoughts one happens to have" (O'Keefe, p. 86). The conventional design logic rests upon the assumption that communication "is constituted by cooperation" (O'Keefe, p. 86). The third design logic, rhetorical message design, moves beyond simple means-ends reasoning about communication. People working from this premise understand that "communication is the creation and negotiation of social selves and situations" (O'Keefe, p. 87). From this perspective, communication is *constitutive*, and not merely representative, of meaningful things in the world.

The theory of message design logics maintains that “there is a logically necessary order to the acquisition of expressive, conventional, and rhetorical premises about communication” (O’Keefe & McCornack, 1987, p. 72). Resultantly, those *capable* of working from rhetorical design logics have the option—or, at least, the ability—to employ conventional or expressive logics, whereas people with communication competence developed to the level of expressive message design logic are unable to maintain communication based upon the premises rooted in the conventional or rhetorical approach to language. McClish (1994) usefully notes, “It is important to realize, though, that that the rhetorical design logic is not the only approach that is inherently ‘rhetorical’ in the humanist’s terms” (p. 33).

O’Keefe and colleagues’ work has largely focused upon the explication of message design logics’ *causal* relationship to message production (see O’Keefe, 1997, p. 98). In other words, message design logics are said to limit or enable people’s ability to produce certain kinds or varieties of messages (see e.g., O’Keefe & McCornack, 1987, on the pursuit of multiple goals in regulative communication situations). I should note that O’Keefe’s work stresses that message design logics are features of *cognition*; the role of cognitive ability and mental representation are in the foreground, and the *productive* role of discourse in the background, in much of the writing on message design logics (see, e.g., O’Keefe & Delia, 1982). The theory of message design logics has been applied in organization studies to topics such as individual responses to sexual harassment in the workplace (Bingham, 1991; Bingham & Burleson, 1989) and beliefs about to superior-subordinate evaluation (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996).

O’Keefe and Lambert (1995) advise scholars to analyze the *content and empirical consequences* of design logics over description of their uses and functions in naturalistic settings. They do so because interpretive meaning is multiplex and indeterminate. My study, of course, embraces the nuances and indeterminacy of interpretive research. As such, I treat message design logics as *vocabularies of communication*, which we might compare to humanistic work on the grammar/rhetoric of motives (Burke, 1969a, 1969b; Mills, 1940). In contrast with the traditions O’Keefe draws from, my traditions’ “analytical approaches and truth claims tend to be ad hoc and situational, rather than universal [... seeking] specific knowledge about specific texts and contexts” (McClish, 1994, p. 28). Tracy and Coupland (1990) point out that cognitively-oriented and discourse-oriented studies share at least two similar commitments about communication: “(1) a recognition of the intertwined nature of ‘goal’ and ‘discourse’; and (2) a recognition that people typically have more than one goal when they talk with others” (p. 2). Accordingly, I incorporate O’Keefe’s (1988) conception of message design logics in this review of literature on lay theory.

Introduction to Argyris and Colleagues’ Theories-in-Use and Espoused Theories

Chris Argyris developed these concepts with several colleagues as part of a larger methodological project, “action science.” Action science theorists and researchers “are concerned with how knowledge of the commonsense understanding of social actors is possible. In this sense the human sciences may be said to be built on an epistemology of practical knowledge” (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985, p. 11). Action scientists investigate the interplay of people’s lay understandings and their behavior in the world,

especially in organizational and community settings. For, “human behavior [...] is directly influenced by our actions and therefore by our theories of action. The behavior world is an artifact of our theories-in-use” (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 17). The goal for action science theorists and practitioners is the production of “actionable knowledge,” which describes the world *and* prescribes paths for change in language that is familiar—or, at least, comprehensible—to the people consulted or studied. This methodology has been popularized in writing about “organizational learning” by Senge (1990) and Whyte (1991), among others. I should note that Senge and colleagues recently applied theories of organizational learning to the problem of sustainability in several publications for lay audiences (Senge, Laur, Schley, & Smith, 2006; Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, & Schley, 2008). The book *Presence* (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004), a nontechnical adaptation of the theory of “double loop learning,” has received much attention from Office staff members, especially Robin Carson.

The aim of this research is enhanced effectiveness *paired with* greater self-awareness and self-possession—double loop learning (see Argyris, 1977). Obviously, a single person or group of people may learn and adapt *without* conscious reflection upon the premises that guide their action. Argyris and colleagues identify these processes as “single loop learning.” Double loop learning enables actors to “learn to change our governing variables,” rather than simply satisfy them in our action (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 18). An individual or collective engaged in double loop learning maintains the capacity to reflect openly and honestly about two types of “theories of action” employed by actors.

Theories of action are essentially people's everyday understanding of (1) situations and (2) the action or actions required to bring about (3) some desired outcome or state of affairs (Argyris & Schön, 1974, pp. 3-6). These theories necessarily rest upon assumptions, since people are at best capable of "bounded rationality" (Simon, 1976). The dynamic relationship between two types of theories of action, espoused theories and theories-in-use, is crucial to the realization of (in)effectiveness; for action scientists, this is true at both individual and organizational levels (Argyris, 1976). Espoused theories are "the theory of action [a person] gives allegiance, and which, upon request, [she or] he communicates to others" (Argyris & Schön, p. 7). Theories-in-use, by contrast, must be reconstructed "from observations of his [or her] behavior [... which involves] assumptions about self, others, the situation, and the connections among action, consequence, and situation" (Argyris & Schön, p. 7). Theories-in-use are treated by action researchers as "tacit cognitive maps by which human beings design action [... and which] can be made explicit by reflecting on action [... though] we should note that the act of reflection itself is governed by theories-in-use" (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985, p. 82). Their point goes beyond the common observation that people fail to walk their talk, as the saying goes. In other words, it is not the case that people fail to hold to their "actual theory" of action: "There is a theory that is consistent with what they do; and this we call their theory-in-use. [... What] people do is not accidental. They do not 'just happen' to act in a particular way" (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, p. 82).¹⁵

In the review below, I explore Argyris and colleagues' development of two models of action based upon espoused theories and those in-use in greater detail. Model I and Model II practices correspond, respectively, with single and double loop learning.

For now, I will point out that *communication lies at the heart* of transitions from Model I to Model II behavior and thus from single to double loop learning. While Argyris and colleagues' conception of human action is decidedly behaviorist, communication plays an important role in their approach to lay theory and theorizing.

Introduction to Three Dialectical Themes in the Treatments of Lay Theory

A number of themes cut across these different explanations of lay theorizing in social life. Above, I discussed the role of dialectical thinking in conceptualizing lay theory, itself. Here, I will demonstrate how thinking in terms of dialectics is a useful way to apprehend academic *discussions of* lay theory. I will address three dialectics—namely, simplicity-complexity, knowledge-knowing, implicitness-explicitness. In doing so, I offer a perspective on lay theory scholarship that takes the constitutive power of communication seriously; is appropriate to organizational analysis; and foregrounds the fluid, ongoing character of theorizing and organizing. In each subsection, I present unique quotations and examples that substantiate a dialectical view of lay theorizing. I am *intentionally suturing together the work of theorists not commonly in conversation with one another*. I do so because I believe that an eclectic, inclusive take on lay theorizing can enrich the discipline of organizational communication in particular, and the field of organization studies more broadly.

The Simplicity-Complexity Dialectic

In this chapter, I have discussed lay theories as knowledge claims applied to supposedly real systems (i.e., complex wholes). The simplicity-complexity dialectic captures the difficulty of making knowledge claims about complex wholes. Each of the

three discussions of lay theory I selected acknowledges that lay theorization involves *both* simplifications of experience *and* complex forms or patterns of explanation.

Vallacher and Wegner's action identification. Vallacher and Wegner's theory of action identification hinges to the notion of simplification. Recall that their theory attempts an explanation how people know and say what they do, so to speak. Their notion of *identification level* crystallizes the role of simplification in their model of lay theorizing. People may identify an act at either a low or high level. Low-level act identities are characterized by descriptions that hew close to simple action, the lowest level being characterized by descriptions of bodily action. High-level act identities are more broad, abstract, and encompassing. So one may say that they are "raising an arm and extending a hand to engage a switch" or that they are "turning off a light when leaving work for the day." The latter example, turning off a light at the end of the workday, is a higher level act identity because it assumes the first, flipping a switch. Indeed, leaving for the day usually requires other low-level act identities, such as "saying goodbye to others" and "getting my coat." Introducing sustainability into the mix would engage a very high-level act identity. So, turning off the lights might be "conserving energy," "being responsible," "leading others by example," or even "helping the planet." The point is not to assume that one of these accounts is best, but that the act of turning off lights may have a particularly abstract meaning for the person involved.

Vallacher and Wegner (1985, p. 229) note that high-level act identities are usually more meaning-rich for the people providing them. Interestingly enough, high-level act identification involves simplification as much as low-level act identification. A supervisor who says that they are "firing someone or letting someone go" is describing a

scenario that involves lots of lower level act identities. Vallacher and Wegner call this integration act identity structures. To “let someone go” may involve “letting Security know in advance,” “sitting the person down,” “giving bad news,” and so on. It should be obvious that *giving someone bad news* may be a complex action also involving lower-level act identities—being honest and direct, speaking calmly, etc.—rather than just informing someone of something another they feel badly about. Changes in context may require different low-level identifications.¹⁶ Since, according to these authors, people adjust their cognitive and linguistic representations of everyday action in order to maintain, change, and navigate actions in relationships with other people, a variety of factors press upon people’s statements about action. Vallacher and Wegner (1985) summarize:

The [act identity] emergence process occurs rapidly and repeatedly in daily life. Many actions must change their meanings through [...] downward and upward movements in identity structures, because it is only by virtue of these movements that the person links together the actions of the day. (p. 124)

By “downward and upward movements” they mean that people engage in action with reference to language that is less and more abstract, or less and more encompassing. But, it is uncommon for people to be called upon to account for all this when they provide act identifications in everyday situations, if they are called upon to verbalize what they think they are doing at all. Thus, people use high-level act identities (i.e., they use explanative language that is abstract) when the context makes it possible to have “a clear sense of the larger meaning of what one is doing,” when the action is not too difficult, and when the person is experienced with the action (Vallacher & Wegner, 1987, p. 6). In these ways, action identification theory treats lay theorizing as a dialectical process of people creating simple *and* complex accounts of their experience. In the language of this treatment of lay

theorizing, everyday action identification “[tends] to spawn identity structures that lack the symmetry and closure normally associated with hierarchies” (p. 12).

O’Keefe’s message design logics. O’Keefe’s theory also engages the simplicity-complexity dialectic. The message design logic model, write O’Keefe and McCornack (1987), “offers an analysis of message-to-task fit, positing that the apparent style of an individual’s messages will vary with situation and task” (pp. 70-71). This argument is fundamental to O’Keefe’s approach, and it structures the simplicity-complexity dialectic’s play in the approach.

There are two ways we can read the dialectic in her theory. First, as I discussed earlier, O’Keefe conceives of the message design logics as progressively complex. A rhetorical logic is more complex than a conventional logic, which demonstrates more sophistication than an expressive logic. O’Keefe (1988) points out that

Individuals sometimes do fail to adopt and pursue goals that are intrinsically relevant to a situation. For example, a person can show a lack of consideration by failing to appreciate the relevance of face goals [i.e., “face-saving”] to his or her actions, and not by performing any action intentionally designed to give offense. [... Furthermore,] even when different individuals recognize the objectives to be met in a situation, their personal representations of a general or common situational objective may vary. (p. 82)

People who operate with expressive design logics are less likely to recognize the diversity of goals that bear upon a communication situation, since their fundamental premise is that communication is used to *bring out* inner cognitions, emotions, and such. Second, the face goals example highlights the fact that relatively simple message design logics, when not suitable to the communication task, may introduce complexity into the situation (e.g., by adding the goal of conflict resolution to the preexisting task). Besides, complex situations are subject to a variety of interpretations, which themselves may be

simplifications to a greater or lesser extent. O’Keefe and McCornack (1987) explain,

In contrast to [...] relatively simple communication situations, a situation in which goal achievement requires drawing a clear separation between subjective and intersubjective relevance, or in which goal achievement is facilitated by reorganizing the communication context, will promote message diversity by leading different design logics to generate different messages. This is because, in such situations, those employing conventional and rhetorical design logics distinguish between issues that are objectively relevant and those that are only subjectively relevant, whereas those relying on an expressive logic do not; and because those employing conventional design logic operate within established situation parameters whereas those employing rhetorical logic make overt efforts to change the situation. (p. 74)

To sum: message design logics are conceived as progressively complex cognitive representations of communication. As well, situations that involve multiple goal possibilities may be made *more or less* complex if participants all operate from the more complex rhetorical design logic, while people employing differing or inappropriately simple design logics may *generate* situational complexity.

Let us return to the example of a person turning off lights around the workplace at the end of a work shift. A person working from an expressive message design logic may simply tell people, “I’m an environmentalist, and so I make sure to reduce my energy consumption when I can.” According to O’Keefe, such statements will not be oriented toward any pragmatic purpose. Instead, the expressive communicator will simply announce their impressions of what they are doing, should they have reason to do so. (In fact, it is likely that many people, when asked why they turn off lights at the end of the day, would simply respond, “I don’t know; I just do.”) Someone working from a conventional design logic, however, will say that they are “following the rules,” “doing what others do,” or “helping the organization meet its goals.” Participants in an energy use reduction campaign are likely to use conventional reasoning to justify their choice to

turn off lights. Thus, the message about the action positions the actor with reference to a particular audience or group, which is not the case for messages generated from an expressive logic. A person working from a rhetorical perspective would likely utilize multiple justifications for and accounts of their action when speaking to different people. Their language use would depend upon the impression they wish to make upon the message's hearers, as well as how they would like to be seen as a speaker.

The act of turning off the lights may be accounted for with relatively simple to relatively sophisticated communication techniques. Nevertheless, "meaning does not so much reside in the form of a message [i.e., design logic], but on the function and evaluation of the message in situ; hence, sophisticated may not always mean effective" (Peterson & Albrecht, 1996, p. 305). So, the self-defined environmentalist employing an expressive design logic can add complexity to a situation. It is not hard to imagine that coworkers could find someone speaking openly and with little strategic purpose about their environmentally friendly behavior to be preachy, holier-than-thou, or pushy. In that way, the expressive communicator could undermine their stated environmental goals by annoying or offending colleagues who might otherwise consider taking up the behavior. Of course, a nuanced message produced by someone acting rhetorically may well bring about the very same response. Message design logics are not determinative of specific messages, nor are they determinative of success. Message design logics range from simple to complex, and communicators maintain complex relationships to speech situations with their use (O'Keefe, 1997).

Argyris' theories-in-use and espoused theories. There are at least three ideas within Argyris and colleagues' approach to lay theorizing that highlight the simplicity-

complexity dialectic: constancy, consistency, and congruence. These three terms may be grouped together as *loci of contradiction or corroboration*—this label is mine, not theirs—within and between theories-in-use and espoused theories. As with the other two perspectives on lay theory, action science treats lay theories as simplified or shorthand representations of the world by nature and necessity (see Argyris & Schön, 1974, pp. 5-6). It is because lay theories are heuristic schemes that Argyris and colleagues discuss constancy, consistency, and congruence as indicators of the complexity of lay theorizing.

Argyris and Schön (1974) believe the following:

Theories-in-use maintain a person's field of constancy. They specify the governing variables and their critical relationships to one another—for example, which variables have priority. They specify the acceptable ranges for these variables and the objective functions for new governing variables. [...] Theories-in-use are the means of maintaining specific constancies, but they also come to be valued in their own right for the constancy of the world-picture they provide. The inherent variability of the behavior world gives us more information than we can handle, so we value a stable world-picture, being predictable, and being able to predict. (pp. 16-17)

Constancy is a kind of simplification that enables people to deal with change and uncertainty, and it is an inherent feature of theories-in-use. Of course, the presumption is that the behavioral world—and, I would add, the realm of meaning and interpretation—is immeasurably complex.

As people grapple with the flux of the world, their theories also demonstrate greater or less consistency. Consistency is the degree to which a lay theory remains coherent insofar as the assumptions it carries remain applicable to the situation being theorized in addition to remaining relatively consistent with one another. When a theory is inconsistent, its variables are not in agreement or it is not in agreement with other theories used by the same person. Take, for example, the sentiment expressed to me that

“We can’t scare people into sustainability.” This statement is obviously inconsistent with another popular theory that was often repeated in the case I am studying: “Human beings will only do something about sustainability when they’re faced with an immediate crisis or catastrophe.” The two theories are incompatible and markedly reductionist. Still, I have heard them both stated many times, sometimes by one person during a single conversation. This, of course, makes for a particularly exasperated sustainability advocate and a complex, if utterly conflicted and inconsistent, view of human agency.

Congruence is the final dimension of the simplicity-complexity dialectic I will explore here:

Congruence means that one’s espoused theory matches his [or her] theory-in-use—that is, that one’s behavior fits his [or her] espoused theory. A second (and much-used) meaning of congruence is allowing inner feelings to be expressed in actions: when one feels happy, [she or] he acts happy. Double loop learning enables actors to “learn to change our governing variables,” rather than simply satisfy them in our action. (Argyris & Schön, 1974, p. 23)

Colloquially, a person demonstrating congruence is said to *walk their talk*. Interestingly enough, double loop learning is a process by which people learn to *talk their walk*. Put another way, double loop learning is about developing people’s capacity to reflect on and speak about their theories-in-use in order to mutually align them with espoused theories. As people and organizations learn, they grapple with the complexity of resolving contradiction of three sorts—constancy, consistency, and congruence.

These ideas can be readily applied to the example of a person turning off lights at the end of a workday. Imagine that this person thinks and talks about herself or himself as a “passionate environmentalist.” They might espouse the belief, “Sustainability is my job and affects every part of my life.” Such an assertion might encounter challenges rooted in constancy. While this person may be particularly vigilant, they may not turn off lights

when they exit every room or at the end of every workday. Indeed, their employer may install occupancy sensors that the person rightly or wrongly believes will do the job for her/him. The person may learn more about sustainability related matters, and discover that their action, in isolation, saves relatively little or no energy, given the design of most US electricity grids. Their “passionate environmentalist” self-image may come to be recognized as inconsistent. Lastly, our “passionate environmentalist” may find their espoused theory of self to be incongruent with many other dimensions of their consumption (e.g., in their household, in transportation, in material waste disposal), which an obsession about workplace lights covers up, if you will. Indeed, this person may be someone who leaves office lights on, computers running, and such. In all of these ways, the simplifying function of theories-in-use and espoused theories generate complexity. That complexity may be revealed when the mindful analyst considers the theories’ internal consistency, their relationship with one another, and their relationship to the greater world.

Summary. Theories derive much of their practical and persuasive power from reduction. Any understanding achieved through theorization is always couched in a particular perspective and is contingent upon any number of premises or circumstances. Anderson (1996) argues, “We cannot understand a paradigm, discipline, or particular theory without investigating what it opposes, excludes, denies, or suppresses” (p. 10). Lay theories are also irreducibly complex. They are complex and sometimes inconsistent in their logic and structure. Moreover, the *practice* of lay theorizing is complex, since people work both within and upon systems when using the language of lay theory. Each of the three approaches to lay theory discussed here grapple with the simplicity-

complexity dialectic in some manner.

The Knowledge-Knowing Dialectic

Earlier, I explained how organization researchers have used ethnomethodology to explain organizational knowledge as an accomplishment rooted in processes of organizational knowing. The knowledge-knowing dialectic in discussions of lay theory deals with just this problem. As the making of knowledge claims, lay theorizing involves processes that constitute knowledge. However, the theorist must deal with (e.g., use as a warrant, challenge as an assumption) the established facts of the situation. I explained this claim by comparing lay theorization to structural perspectives (Banks & Riley, 1993; Giddens, 1984) and to ethnomethodological perspectives (Kuhn & Jackson, 2008; Nicolini, Gherardi, & Yanow, 2003) on organizing. Our three approaches to lay theory treat knowledge simultaneously as a social object and a flow of individual and collective experience. While these three approaches deal with the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of lay theory, it is important to see that knowledge also has extra-linguistic, embodied, and aesthetic dimensions (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007). Below, I provide evidence of dialectical thinking about knowledge in the three selected approaches to lay theorizing.

Vallacher and Wegner's action identification. Vallacher and Wegner (1987) begin their arguments with this mundane but important observation: "People always seem to be doing something. They also seem to be quite adept at identifying what they are doing. What is less clear is how these two observations relate to one another" (p. 3). The social psychologists' work pertains to mental and discursive representations' connection to the maintenance or alteration of behavior. Reasoning from research data, Vallacher and

Wegner (1985) conjecture that

The emergence of self-defining identities does not imply a deliberate process of self-scrutiny. [...] During [...] periods of existential crisis, the person attempts to discern patterns in courses of action he or she has chosen, so that these actions might be identified in a broader context of goals and purposes. But it probably is more often the case that the sort of self-understanding implied in our account emerges over time without explicit recognition of the transition from doing to being. Just as “hitting the right keys” gradually becomes “playing the piano” without a dramatic shift in understanding, so too do self-thematic identities become part of us without our awareness of what has occurred. It could be argued, in fact, that conscious attempts to forge this sort of understanding often promote disappointment rather than enlightenment. An identity may emerge, of course, but if it would not have emerged naturally anyway, it may prove difficult to maintain effectively over time. (p. 190)

The overarching lesson is that people do several things with discourse. People account for past and current behavior to demonstrate their knowledge to others. They also use discourse to drive purposive action—that is, to provide a frame of reference that suggests certain patterns of behavior. As well, people who have undertaken certain practices may change their discourse use over time, often without reflection, as their *knowledge* is shaped in/by the experience of *knowing* what one is doing. Vallacher and Wegner (1987) give the example of action maintenance on the part of a person using a high-level act identity:

In essence, a person with a relatively high-level understanding already knows what he or she is doing and thus is less primed to accept other understandings at the same level provided by the context surrounding the action. Such understanding allows people to maintain a course of action in the face of changing conditions with the passage of time. (p. 8)

Yet, as demonstrated in the example of piano playing, conditions change and people regularly alter their self-understanding without deliberation and reflection. In that way, Vallacher and Wegner’s theory of action identification accounts for the dialectical essence of knowledge as a thing symbolized by people, and as a complex and never-

ending process of coming to know (i.e., knowing).

For example, Office of Sustainability staff members, routinely and repetitively laud people who are doing something sustainable or are being sustainable. Additionally, practices, artifacts, or systems are regularly labeled *unsustainable* by OS staff and volunteers. Using the ideograph sustainability, they provide people with a high-level justification for behavior, or attempt to present a challenge to what another person is doing. Importantly, many people do not carry on their work and studies at IWU with reference to discourses of sustainability. As such, providing new language structures presents people with the discursive means by which they may maintain desired actions, and complicates people's attempts to justify undesired actions. At the same time, the OS has struggled to "show people what IWU is doing already" that is sustainable. Facilities Management began projects to retrofit light fixtures across campus and monitor campus sprinkler systems with real-time computer models, for example, well before the OS was well established on campus. Faced with the charge from campus stakeholders that "you don't get it" or "you're not doing enough," Office employees and other representatives of Facilities Management routinely label extant projects as sustainable, even if the premises that led to their implementation had little or nothing to do with environmental concern at the earlier time. These interactions demonstrate the struggle over sustainability "knowledge" on campus, and they will, I believe, change the way in which Facilities Management and other departments make sense of efficiency-related projects in the future.

O'Keefe's message design logics. In O'Keefe's development of a theory of message design logics, we can see the knowledge-knowing dialectic in her

developmental/progressive understanding of logics. O’Keefe (1987) argues that messages characteristic of the expressive logic are organized in “reaction to prior [events],” but usually contain “pragmatically pointless content” (p. 85). People working from an expressive logic presume that messages are merely linguistic manifestations of what the individual knows/thinks/feels. Communication makes public knowledge as a stable facet or possession of the speaking person, such that “The messages generated by an expressive logic are straightforward expression (or “dumping”) of salient mental contents” (p. 85). By contrast, a person employing a rhetorical message design logic understands the constitutive power of communication. Framed according to the knowledge-knowing dialectic, rhetorical logics involve the premise that communication facilitates knowing. Indeed, O’Keefe and McCormack (1987) believe that people employing rhetorical design logics *know differently*, if you will. For those using the rhetorical design logic,

the potential of language to evoke roles and to structure context is exploited through the manipulation of stylistic variation in language and explicit contextualizing elaborations of messages. The assume attention to the details of message construction is devoted to message interpretation, leading to more careful listening and deeper interpretation of intentions, motives, and character. (p. 72)

The implication is that people designing messages rhetorically are more attuned to situational change and engage in ongoing and (more) thoroughgoing interpretation. Moreover, people employing a rhetorical design logic may intentionally use communication to *construct* knowledge and interpretation, while that intention is not a feature of the other design systems. The *process* of understanding is more salient for these people than for speakers operating simply from an expressive logic, who treat knowledge as a relatively invariant property of individual speakers.

Let us return to the example of labeling specific projects, artifacts, and technologies as (un)sustainable. In the language of message design logics, it is sensible to say that some people will use this labeling scheme to express some kind of knowledge or opinion. A straightforward, although awkward, exemplar might be, “I think the transportation plan will get us to carbon neutrality rapidly enough, so I believe it is worthy of the label ‘sustainable.’” Such an expression is a statement of individual knowledge. Alternatively, someone reasoning from a rhetorical logic would use the label sustainable to appeal to audiences strategically. For instance, participants in the Office’s Steering Committee meetings would regularly tell one another something to this effect: “We have to help people *see* what this is all about.” The optic metaphor was used, in my interpretation, as a shorthand way for participants to say that labeling existing things and practices sustainable made the concept more tangible, and thus relevant and compelling, for target audiences. Participants regularly fretted that sustainability seemed *too far off* or was not *concrete enough* for other University stakeholders. Resultantly, they actively sought to identify objects and processes in the here-and-now as “sustainable.” This was true despite the fact that participants in my study seemed to share the belief that these things, in isolation or embedded in present systems, will never make for a wholly sustainable campus. Thus, it is apparent that some participants in the study used the labeling technique as a means to shape how people come to be aware of and knowledgeable about sustainability on campus. In other words, they sought to generate new forms of organizational knowing.

Argyris’ theories-in-use and espoused theories. One way to read the knowledge-knowing dialectic into Argyris’ approach to lay theory is to examine his models of

organizational learning. Argyris and Schön (1974) introduced the concepts of “Model I and Model II” thinking and learning. Argyris (2003) suggests, “There is diversity in espoused theories, but not in theories-in-use” (p. 438)—a contestable claim, to be sure.

The most prevalent theories-in-use are supposedly modeled according to

four governing values. They are: (1) achieve your intended purpose, (2) maximize winning and minimize losing, (3) suppress negative feelings, and (4) behave according to what you consider rational. The most prevalent action strategies that arise from Model I are the following: (1) advocate your position, (2) evaluate the thoughts and actions of others (and your own thoughts and actions), and (3) attribute causes for whatever you are trying to understand. (Argyris, 2003, p. 438)

By contrast, Model II theories-in-use are what action scientists are supposed to introduce into organizational systems. Model II theories do not stand in direct opposition to Model I theories, but are alternatives to them.

The aims of Model II are to help people to produce valid information, make informed choices, and develop an internal commitment to those choices. Embedded in these values is the assumption that power (for double loop learning) comes from having reliable information, from being competent, from talking on personnel responsibilities, and from monitoring continually the effectiveness of one’s decisions. (Argyris, 1977, p. 122).

One way to frame the tension between the models is to say that Model I thinking encourages people to establish the legitimacy and power of *knowledge* they possess or with which they are familiar, while Model II thinking encourages people to create and reflect upon systems for creating and sharing new knowledge (i.e., organizational knowing).

Depending upon the circumstances, an analyst may interpret Model I or Model II behavior in the Office of Sustainability’s practice of calling some extant projects and technologies as sustainable. On one hand, it is reasonable to see the labeling of one thing as a “sustainability success” and another thing as a “real problem” or “step backward” as

simply Model I behavior. The label is used to afford legitimacy to select projects (e.g., those projects with a 1- to 10-year payback window). The labels serve as a simple judgment, and causes such as “the hard work and leadership of the Dean” or the “short sightedness of not accounting for our long-term interests in the budgeting process” are attributed in order to parcel out acclaim and blame. On another hand, the introduction of sustainability-related descriptors could be seen as a chance to make information about organizational artifacts and processes more valid, in that they would then take into account environmental costs/harm. The labels are an attempt to introduce a new perspective on the status quo. For this to be a feature of Model II behavior, however, people would need to be competent in sustainability theory and participate in the practices of evaluation freely. The OS staff members approximate some of these standards in their design of the process to create a Climate Action Plan. Stakeholders from across IWU—from Student Services to Auxiliary Services, from associate vice presidents to students—are currently participating in open membership “task teams.” Each task team is undertaking a review of one dimension of IWU subject to the Climate Action Plan: energy, curriculum, transportation, grounds and waste, and communication. More than 80 people have been involved. As such, the exercise offers the possibility for participants to rethink their guiding values and strategies for maintaining an enduring campus, since they construct inventories of present and future activity, discriminate amongst them, and collaborate on crafting a vision of one dimension of sustainability. Ultimately, deciding whether this sort of practice is Model I or Model II behavior would require a more extensive investigation of group communication processes, which I provide later in this study. For now, our example demonstrates how a Model I frame

disposes people to defend the knowledge they (think that they) have, and a Model II frame disposes people to openly negotiate and change how they know. The relationship involves dialectic interplay between knowledge and knowing.

Summary. The knowledge-knowing dialectic represents the twin nature of *understanding*. It may be thought of as an artifact or object used in communication or as a facet of the communication process. The significance of people's level of self-awareness about how knowledge is constituted in organizations is captured in Maslow's (1966) now widely known maxim: "When the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting to treat everything as if it were a nail" (p. 15). Above, I demonstrated the way in these discussions explain the kinds of knowledge people generate with lay theory (e.g., "knowledge tools") and reflect upon the processes people use to construct that knowledge socially (e.g., "finding nails").

The Implicitness-Explicitness Dialectic

Lay theorizing involves both assumption and reasoning from premises as well as outright statement of beliefs and hypotheses. The dynamic relationship between implicitness and explicitness is fundamental to lay theorizing. As Weick and colleagues (2005) put it, "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (p. 416). Each of the three selected approaches handles the implicitness-explicitness dialectic in a unique fashion.

Vallacher and Wegner's action identification. Action identification theory's implicitness-explicitness dialectic is evident in passages that discuss how people come to perform actions expertly or automatically. Vallacher and Wegner (1987) suggest that "with increasing action experience there is a corresponding increase in action

automaticity” (p. 7), by which they mean that actions become familiar *and* more tacit or taken-for-granted over time. As well, new act identities replace old conceptions of what is being done as an action becomes more familiar. They point out, “variation in [persons’] level of identification [...] has implications for the form that action control is likely to take” (p. 8). In other words, the degree to which the people are able to expertly engage in an action is correlated with higher levels of abstraction. People who *know what they’re doing* are likely to have less explicit conceptions of the act they undertake, ironically enough. However, they begin with the assumption that people are socialized and “increasingly held responsible for our actions and so learn to offer public accounts of them. [...] We] clarify our intentions, excuse or justify our misdeeds, point to causes beyond our control, communicate values, and offer evaluations, all through depictions of action.” (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985, pp. 18-19). Vallacher and Wegner, as social psychologists, are more interested in the psychological processes involved than the communication processes. Still, it is clear that communication, as *conscious representation* through symbols, is the means by which action identification is made explicit and practicable in social situations.

For example, in the fall of 2007, during the first half of the Office’s pilot year, I frequently heard Snyder and Valmer, as well as some of the OS interns, use viral metaphors to describe their sustainability-related communication. They would go about infecting people on campus, who themselves would be contagious or would make for a contagion. The contagion would, according to the metaphor, spread widely. More than a few times, Snyder and Valmer told me directly that the use of the metaphor helped represent that IWU leaders “wouldn’t know what hit them.” Effective sustainability-

related communication would act much like the transmission of many viruses, infections, and the like: Everyday interaction spreads it, but the means of transmission goes largely unnoticed in day-to-day life. However, the use of this metaphor rapidly declined during and after the spring of 2008. After that time, I infrequently heard it used. I do not claim that a specific event or sequence of changes *caused* a change, but after the winter and spring of 2008 the metaphors of *sharing* and *showing* were predominant. Around this time, I began hearing specific justifications for framing effective sustainability-related communication as sharing or showing. I was told, “We can’t scare people into sustainability.” Also, I was told that people have to engage sustainability “on their own terms.” This change occurred at a particularly important moment for the Office. First, the OS was formally reviewed and announced as an official unit of IWU at the end of the spring 2008 semester. Previously, the OS had operated as a pilot program, the fate of which was uncertain. During the period of review, Snyder met with high-rank administrators, one of whom announced his skepticism about the urgency and centrality of environmental problems to IWU’s mission. As well, interns and OS staff persons gathering data for the greenhouse gas inventory were confronted by other employee’s apathy and, in few cases, hostility. The Office representatives were asked why anyone should be bothered with the exercise, and were told that asking for complex or nonexistent data created a mighty and unwelcome hassle. Against this backdrop, Office employees and partners began using sharing and showing metaphors more frequently.

Naturally, OS employees continued their practice of seeking out people in diverse administrative units. Targeted people continued to be told that they would be “leaders” and “change champions” in the “sustainability movement” on campus. Yet, the root

metaphors for explaining how these interactions served the goal of sustainability changed. This change was ostensible inasmuch as the patterns of explicit language use I recorded underwent change. At the same time, I believe that the change served an implicit function. That is, the change in metaphors enabled an implicit reframing of how the Office engages in persuasion and influence. This shift was necessary because the Office's work and influence rapidly increased in scope during the pilot year, and its employees were called upon to justify their actions to IWU administration and other audiences more frequently as time passed.

O'Keefe's message design logics. O'Keefe (1988) assumes that each of the message design logics hinge on some premise—an implicit reasoning. To demonstrate the implicitness-explicitness dialectic in the theory of message design logics, it is appropriate to again turn to the hierarchical arrangement of the three types of logic.

O'Keefe and McCornack (1987) explain,

Each move up the hierarchy of message design systems opens up additional possibilities for the use of language. Attaining a conventional level of functioning makes expression an option, a goal one might choose rather than the guiding principle behind the message production system; attaining a rhetorical level of functioning makes affirmation of preexisting roles and routines a choice, rather than a necessary foundation from which all meaning derives. (p. 73).

O'Keefe's research has demonstrated that the ability to use increasingly sophisticated message design logics also enables people to, first, explain their pursuit of multiple goals and, second, better articulate their reasons for evaluating other's messages in a particular way. The key here is that each logic is grounded in implicit beliefs about and attitudes toward communication, and that these are best studied in situations that require multiple communication goals. The assumptions of higher order logics enable people to speak competently and explicitly about other communication logics. The rhetorical design logic

is distinguished in that people using it demonstrate reflexivity about their own impressions of what communication is and can do (McLish, 1994).

Through the lens of message design logics theory, the example of changing metaphors can be explained. An analyst might find that Lillian Valmer, Robin Carson, Russell Snyder, and others changed metaphors as a result of or in order to convey shifting conceptions of the communicative work they do. Statements similar to, “I’ve had a change of heart about how the OS should communicate,” might evince the expressive design logic. Given that I was present in the scene *as a researcher of communication*, OS staff members frequently told me about feelings regarding communication. Of course, it is also the case that Office employees would return to the full group to report on their findings about “how IWU (really) works.” Especially early on, Office advocates sought to develop some relatively stable conceptions of “what’s going on” at IWU. It is plausible, then, to assume that the shift from viral to sharing/showing metaphors was the consequence of a conventional design logic; many times, I heard OS employees and volunteers talk about their interactions with senior administrators and the consequent lessons about “how we (ought to) do things around here,” so to speak. Yet, it is also sensible to interpret the change in predominant root metaphors as evidence of rhetorical message design. In one sense, the change may be seen the creative use of language in order to lay the symbolic ground for creating the organization the OS would like to see realized in the future. The viral metaphor may have made sense, but the participants in the study may have used sharing and showing-related talk to *live the vision*, if you will, of more open and dialogical communication in their ideal sustainable organization (see Deetz, 1995). In another sense, the change in metaphors can be read as a deft strategic

change. As the Office gained public recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of a range of University stakeholders, they needed to account for their position differently. Both metaphor types feature interaction and the spread of ideas and information, but viral metaphors also suggest incompatible or dissimilar goals, alien bodies, and threat to or radical change for the host. Such a representation makes less sense for an organization with improving stature and which has achieved recognition as a valued participant in several decision making processes. Thus, I might also argue that the Office staff acted from a rhetorical design logic in 2008, using strategic communication to change the symbolic elements of the situation in/on which they worked.

In each interpretation, different elements of the message function are left implicit or made explicit by the study participants. In fact, I heard accounts like those described above across the time I spent in the field for this study. Given my interpretive, noncognitive approach, I do not think that any one of these possibilities precludes the others. As Wetherell and Potter (1988) explain, *function* is not an inherent feature of messages but rather the “discovery” of analysis and reflection, be it lay or expert in nature.

Argyris’ theories-in-use and espoused theories. The implicit-explicit dialectic in action science theories is obvious. Theories-in-use “are those that can be inferred from action” (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985, p. 82). They are implicit by definition. Still, theories-in-use can be made explicit through reflection and dialogue. Espoused theories, on the other hand, “are those that an individual claims to follow” (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, pp. 81-82). They are theories made explicit, although not always clear, in discourse. When I explored the simplicity-complexity dialectic above, I noted the ways in

which these implicit and explicit theories play off another.

Using the language of action science, it is clear that, through the use of metaphor, the predominant espoused theory of sustainability-related communication changed at the Office of Sustainability during the spring season of 2008. As I described above, Office of Sustainability employees began in 2008 making a greater number of statements in staff meetings and in public that communication is or ought to be conducted as “showing” (unidirectional) or “sharing” (multidirectional). The viral metaphor featured less in their speaking and writing after that time, and it may thus be said that the logic of that metaphor received diminished emphasis in their espoused/explicit theories.

Reviewing my fieldnotes from the spring season of 2008 onward, I see indications that the premises about communication involved in the viral metaphor still informed Office members’ theories-in-use, though they were less outstanding in employees’ and volunteers’ espoused theories. Since I must be brief here, I will explain the persistence of a viral-like theory-in-use through several phrases that persisted after 2008. When OS employees thought together about strategy for gaining an audience with members of another administrative unit, they regularly spoke of “getting in.” To get in, OS supporters seek out “sustainability champions.” These are people who are believed to already be interested in sustainability, have some sense of efficacy or power in their home organization, and are likely to be well received by the organization’s executive official(s). Persons in executive positions are said to be demonstrating “leadership in sustainability” more frequently than they are called “change champions.” The latter term seems to be informally reserved for staff persons and midlevel managers. The metaphor of the virus should be clear: the OS’s mission/rhetoric is the virus, the change champion represents

the vulnerability/penetrability of the host, the change champion is used to replicate and adapt the OS' rhetoric within the organization, and the organization plays the role of a host that is fundamentally transformed by the incursion of the virus.

More recently, the term facilitation has taken center stage in espoused theories of effective OS action. It is likely that this most recent change in metaphors/espoused theory obscures the endurance of viral thinking and the associated images of penetration, widespread and spontaneous replication, and partner individuals as "carriers" of some sort. This example demonstrates the utility of Argyris and colleagues' recognition of the loose coupling of explicit and implicit theories of action.

Summary. Lay theories are almost always enthymematic. They involve unstated premises and taken-for-granted, substantive knowledge. Yet, as knowledge *claims* with social functions and consequences, lay theories also involve explicit discursive performance. Across the three approaches to lay theory I have reviewed, it is demonstrated that assumptions guide people's explicit communication, and that changes in explicit communication behavior and communication settings has the potential to alter assumptions. The play between implicitness and explicitness is fundamental to lay theorizing.

Summary: Three Dialectics of Academic Treatments of Lay Theory

The practical nature of lay theorizing is what engenders the simplicity-complexity, knowledge-knowing, and implicitness-explicitness dialectics. Lay theories are practical in that they are socially used and useful, that people create meaning and do meaningful things with them. Kurt Lewin (1951) famously wrote, "There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (p. 169). Lay theories bring together people's philosophical-

ideational understandings and specific communication techniques to address problems (Craig & Tracy, 1995). In this chapter, I argued that lay theorizing may be seen as the eclectic, sometimes strategic use of interpretive repertoires to make definitional-conceptual claims. Potter and Wetherell (1987) draw attention to the fact that “interpretive repertoires are used to solve problems, but they also generate difficulties of their own” (p. 155).

As a result, lay theorizing is contingent and ever changing. Writes Garfinkel (1967), “Members’ accounts are reflexively and essentially tied for their rational features to the socially organized occasions of their use, for they are *features* of the socially organized occasions of their use” (p. 4). Similarly, Wetherell (1998) emphasizes “the highly occasioned and situated nature of subject positions and the importance of accountability rather than ‘discourse’ *per se* in fueling the take up of positions in talk” (p. 394). As people communicate conceptions of the world, they negotiate their accountability to those conceptions. That activity is dynamic and complex, but may involve reductionism and simplification to be effective in a variety of contexts—the simplicity-complexity dialectic. Additionally, people must be able to communicate what they or a collective thinks they know, and this is intimately bound up with processes of knowing established by collectives—the knowledge-knowing dialectic. Finally, knowledge is always incomplete, and it is usually shared most readily when members of a collective also share premises or tolerate ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984). Accordingly, lay theories must balance what is stated and unstated—the implicitness-explicitness dialectic. We can see a pattern of dialectical thinking in academic work on lay theory from a variety of disciplines although discussions of lay theory to date have not framed the

literature in dialectical terms. Dialectical thinking is, I think, a suitable frame for a discourse-centered approach to lay theory and theorizing.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 provided a detailed review of the theory that serves as the foundation for my perspective on communication, organization, and lay theory. I highlighted why this is a study of discursive practice, and I gave particular attention to the fact that this is, in part, a study of how people make sense of organizational rhetoric with discourse. My review of the concept of organization further situated this as a study of discourse, though I explained the relevance of material concerns to the topic of organizational sustainability. I outlined a communication-oriented approach to lay theorizing, relying principally on Potter and Wetherell's notion of interpretive repertoires. I then used that perspective to rethink three classical and cognition-oriented treatments of lay theorizing. I demonstrated three dialectical tensions characteristic to that literature: simplicity-complexity, knowledge-knowing, and implicitness-explicitness.

The next chapter details my methodological approach to this study. It grounds my discourse- and rhetoric-sensitive approach to communication in interpretive epistemology, with some consideration of the critical tradition in communication studies. I explain how I utilized an interpretive perspective and participant observation, interviewing, and textual research methods. The research data generated from those methods will be analyzed with the techniques developed by grounded theory methodologists (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I believe that, when paired with the theoretical perspective developed in this chapter, those

methodological considerations provide for a robust, nuanced analysis of lay theories at play in a case of organizing for sustainability.

Notes

¹ These kinds of changes *include* processes of identification, whereby people consubstantiate—or, colloquially, link or make common—their individual interests with that of the organized collective (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b, 1985; Tompkins & Cheney, 1983). As is now common in organizational communication scholarship dealing with rhetoric, I assume that the term rhetoric *encapsulates both persuasion and identification*. I recognize that this definition may favor rhetoric’s *intentional* dimensions and minimize attention to its broader and unintended social dimensions and consequences.

² I explain my epistemological choices and the tradition of interpretivism in greater detail in Chapter 5.

³ In some cases, people have made the claim simply and tersely: A sustainable university is one where people work together and get out of their silos. In other cases, the theory expressed with greater attention to detail.

⁴ The notion that a greater number of interconnections connections improves the functioning of a communication network is a common belief that simplifies a more complex reality (see Corman & Scott, 1994; Eisenberg, Monge, & Miller, 1984; Ray, 1993; Reagans & McEvily, 2003).

⁵ Koch and Deetz (1981) call this the “non-ostensive reference” of organizational communication in constituting social reality (pp. 3-4).

⁶ For a discussion of naturalization in the context of environmental matters, see Carbaugh (1996).

⁷ Of course, calling something nonscientific or nonprofessional/unprofessional is an evaluative act (see e.g., Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Cheney, Lair, Ritz, & Kendall, 2010). The discourses of science and profession are cultural resources, and struggle over the labels “scientific” and “professional(ism)” is a communicative activity that connects people with cultural capital, status, and power (Douglas, 1986). It matters, then, that professional academics have often defined lay theory by what is *not*—a professional endeavor hewed to the scientific method.

⁸ A scientific or professional group producing theory is defined by its membership. Members should be afforded “expert” status or some comparable standing in the eyes of most people, I would presume. It should nevertheless be obvious that experts may produce lay theories when those individuals are members of other collectives dealing with other problems. In my case, many experts in a variety of subjects were involved. (The study was conducted at a university, after all.) Still, the contributors to the Office of Sustainability were not collectively or individually communication experts, communication scholars, or professional theorists of communication. As such, they developed *lay theories* of communication. Regardless, the lay status of this (or any) group’s theorizing does not mean that they cannot act with skill and wisdom. Also, it is

not the case that scientific theories are inherently better than lay theories; they are simply constructed, confirmed, and put to use in different ways.

⁹ My ethnographic observations demonstrate that these arguments have come to the minds of OS employees and volunteers. However, when they come up, those arguments are usually positioned as *gripes* about a reified reality they have to “deal with.” Someone *without* “*common sense*” would argue that IWU ought to rethink its elevation of select forms and uses of data. Indeed, it is common to hear OS staff and volunteers say—and, I should mention, I am paraphrasing here—that people who argue against sustainability-related change “either don’t know or don’t understand the data.”

¹⁰ I should add nuance to this line of reasoning. I am saying that people *accomplish* reasonableness (Garfinkel, 1967). Lay theories are not objectively better or worse. It is not the case that a complex or contradictory lay theory is somehow more “subtle” than another. Additionally, the specific discursive devices used on some occasion should not be confused with the *system* of discursive devices comprising an interpretive repertoire. (To use a naturalizing metaphor, we should not confuse the *trees* with the *forest*.) Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan (2008) do, I think, confuse a collection of discursive devices *with* an IR, when they define “discursive devices” as “a lexicon or register” (p. 102). The authors observed and recorded a “training session” connected to “the rollout phase of a new quality framework information system” (p. 107). Working from a 60-second statement by one trainer, the authors identify at least 12 discursive devices in use, pointing out multiple contradictions. The authors’ confusion leads them to insinuate that the trainer acts as a “rhetorically competent, creative, and reflexive agent” *without* devoting attention to the rhetorical effects/audience’s response (p. 115). While Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan do note the difference between speech *acts* and *effects* (p. 111), they seem to jump to the conclusion that situated, complex, paradoxical speech *evidences* rhetorical competence. It may well be the case that the members of the audience at the training session thought of the trainer’s talk as *babble*. While I agree with Whittle, Mueller, and Mangan that attention to the subtleties of peoples’ talk is important, I believe they confuse the *elements* of an IR with the system as a *whole*. This confusion leads them to neglect the interpretations of other people in the context as to whether the trainer’s speech made sense and did, in fact, evince “rhetorical competence” (see the discussion of audiences in Potter & Wetherell, 1987, pp. 170-181).

¹¹ This is a particular challenge in environmental matters; the rhetoric of environmental activist organizations is often characterized by polarizing, sometimes anti-dialogical rhetoric (Killingsworth & Palmer, 1995). Such an approach to communication process can entrench positions *within* organizations, especially organizations with missions that are not expressly activism-oriented, and suppress managers’ openness to change (Deetz, 2005b; Seiling, 2001).

¹² Gherardi and Nicolini (2003), for example, demonstrate how knowledge may be “accomplished” and “made organizational” (i.e., organized) in their examination of safety as a “collective capacity or competence” (p. 209). Quoting Engeström and Middleton (1996), they explain that expertise or expert knowledge in such an area is

fundamentally communicative, since “expertise [is an] ongoing collaborative and discursive construction of tasks, solutions, visions, breakdowns, and innovations” (p. 204). An example is the inspection (Gherardi & Nicolini, pp. 217-220). Inspections involve inspectors who utilize bureaucratic discourses and apply/accommodate those discourses to specific cases. The inspections reinforce standards, codes, and the like, which serve to reify certain artifacts and practices as “safe,” and the nature of those artifacts (e.g., cement mixers, cranes, torches) provide some boundary conditions about how people can make sense of safety. Reports provide authoritative accounts of “what is going on.” And, of course, those subject to inspection, “such as the construction companies and professionals, influence the premises and activity of the control agency [...] by participating in the ‘conversation’ among organizations that determines local safety practices—and distinguishes them from those of other communities of practice” (p. 219). Involved in all of the interactions are interpretations and evaluations what is “known” or “unknown” about the site vis-à-vis discourses of safety. People’s theories about organizational performance in the area of safety become particularly important under conditions of equivocality (Weick, 1995a) and crisis (Weick & Suttcliffe, 2007). This example demonstrates how people co-create organizational knowledge through mutual equivalence structures:

Mutual equivalence structure comes into existence when my ability to perform my consummatory act depends on *someone else* performing an instrumental act. Furthermore, my performance of my instrumental act has the function of eliciting the other’s instrumental act. (Weick, 1979, p. 98)

A crucial point here is that “the sharing of beliefs is not essential to the perpetuation of interlocked behaviors” that constitute organizational knowing (Weick, 1979, p. 98).

¹³ In a footnote, Watzlawick, Weakland, and Fisch (1974), point out that a theoretic understanding of communication and action that effects change are only weakly associated:

To express or explain something requires a shift to one logical level above what is to be expressed or explained. No explaining can be accomplished on the same level; a metalanguage has to be used, but this metalanguage is not necessarily available. To effect change is one thing; to communicate about this change is something else: above all, a problem of correct logical typing and of creating and of creating an adequate metalanguage. (p. 79)

What they are saying is that the accomplishment or alteration of action/knowledge may take place without a coherent explanation. But, when people seek to explain action, a metalanguage is required. To theorize, people must develop reflexive language: language that accounts for the discourses they use. Along these lines, Craig (199) treats theorizing, lay and nonlay alike, as “practical metadiscourse.”

¹⁴ I will call these *discussions, treatments, or explanations of lay theory* rather than “theories of lay theory.” I use such labels because I wish to avoid the awkwardness and

repetitiveness of phrases such as “academic theories of lay theories.” Also, I wish to avoid confusion. Scholarly inquiry into lay theorization—be it scientific, humanistic, or a blend of those perspectives—is actually theorization of a different sort, produced in different kinds of communities (Furnham, 1988). That is, what we might call academic or scientific theories are *not* simply lay theories “turned up a notch” or lay theories that are enhanced, refined, and improved.

¹⁵ It bears mentioning that feminists have critiqued Argyris’ work and related scholarship for its implicitly gendered conceptions of actors and action (e.g., Hatcher, 2003).

¹⁶ The recent film *Up in the Air* (Reitman, 2009) provides a good example. The main character—Ryan Bingham, played by George Clooney—is a consultant who primarily fires people at client firms. Bingham ends up teaching a young colleague—Natalie Keener, played by Anna Kendrick—how he goes about expertly terminating people’s employment. The audience is party to several virtuosic performances by Bingham. At first, he has a difficult time describing to Keener what he does. Called upon to do so, he uses high-level act identities, but Keener must first provide act identities at a lower level, since she is new to the profession. However, Keener has also designed computer-mediated processes by which employees at her company may go about doing the same work. To understand what is basically the same act identity structure—acting as a consultant who lays employees at client firms off—Bingham must be given a host of new low-level act identities specific to Keener’s computer-mediated process. Thus, the context change requires a renegotiation of the identity of the act (i.e., how the two speak about and make sense of the action they undertake).

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter presents my methodological choices and their implications. First, I describe my study as an interpretive investigation that employs modest critique. Second, I provide detailed accounts of my approaches to data gathering, as well as my treatment of the types of data produced. Third, I explain how my data analysis techniques were informed by grounded theory methodology (GTM) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Ultimately, I designed this interpretive and in-depth case study to provide a rich, nuanced account of communication at an emerging organization dedicated to sustainability.

Epistemological Perspective: Interpretivism

For this study, I utilized an interpretivist perspective on research methodology. In this section, I describe my attitude toward knowledge production and use, position this study according to neo-Weberian traditions, present my response to the contingencies and risks of interpretivism, and outline my treatment of research data.

Organizational Research and Theory in the Interpretive Tradition

Putnam's 1983 essay in the book *Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach* was an early delineation of the meaning of "interpretive research" in the field of organizational communication. Her definition of interpretive research

borrowed from the distinction between interpretivism and functionalism in Burrell and Morgan's (1979) now classic categorization of research paradigms in organizational analysis. She explains,

The interpretive approach as a paradigm for social science research is actually a compilation of diverse philosophical and sociological traditions. [...] In addition to [a] meaning-centered focus, interpretive schools share general assumptions about the nature of reality and social order, the role of knowledge in social, action and the relationship between human beings and their environment. (Putnam, 1983, p. 32)

In contrast to functionalism's generally positivistic approach to society and social research, Putnam writes, "interpretivists believe that reality is socially constructed through words, symbols, and behaviors of its members," and "collectivities are symbolic processes that evolve through streams of ongoing behavior instead of through static social facts" (p. 35). Geertz (1973) puts the matter succinctly and poetically: "[Human beings are] an animal suspended in webs of significance [they themselves have] spun" (p. 5). Organizations are a particular kind of "web." Thus, an interpretive perspective treats organizations *as* lively social collectivities rather than preexisting structures that contain symbolic activity (see Axley, 1984; Hawes, 1974).

As social collectivities, organizations are in large part human constructions, composed of "complex, semiautonomous relationships that originate from human interactions" (Putnam, 1983, p. 35). In Weber's (1962) terms, "An 'organization' is a system of continuous activity pursuing a goal of a specified kind" (p. 115). That is, human interaction is organizational when it takes the form of "collective structure" that delimits and enables *activity as an ensemble* (Weick, 1979; see also Barnard, 1938/1968; Tompkins, 1984). Organizations are grounded in meaning because meanings "evolve from interaction processes and the ways that individuals make sense of their talk.

Process [...] refers to the ongoing, everchanging sets of interlocked behaviors that create as well as change organizational events” (Putnam, p. 40). Put another way, “[the] language trappings of organizations [...] are important components in the creating of order. [...] The conditions for order in organizations exist as much in the mind as they do in the rationalized procedures” (Weick, 1987, p. 98).

The Office of Sustainability (OS) I studied provides a fitting example. Certainly, the addition of the OS to the formal organizational structure of Intermountain West University (IWU) was a meaningful symbolic exercise on the part of the administration. Indeed, manipulation of organizational structure is as much a symbolic move as it is a functional one (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The Office possesses no formal authority over most university operations. Its employees do not run or design buildings, its employees do not review the purchase of materials in other operational units; its employees do not monitor and adjudicate staff and faculty travel except for the purpose of “carbon accounting.” In other words, the OS is loosely coupled with other operational units (Weick, 1976). Still, Office staff members develop formal policy statements for administrative adoptions, maintain formal groups and informal networks of faculty and staff devoted to sustainability issues, educate and consult others regarding developments in the science and economics of sustainability, and more. These kinds of activities are essentially symbolic. Especially during the first years, OS employees devoted significant energy to establishing “sustainability” as an important watchword and premise for decision making. Accordingly, those working in behalf of the OS attempted to represent sustainability as a legitimate and actionable goal for IWU. They did so through the appropriation and creation of formal communication channels and media (McPhee,

1985), and they did so through communication networks designed to secure commitment to sustainability-related goals (Eisenberg, Monge, & Miller, 1984). As such, it makes sense to think of the Office of Sustainability as an *organizing collective*—that is, a group of people working to coordinate activity around a particular discourse—as much as an *organization*—that is, a thing with particular structural qualities. I will take an interpretive perspective on the OS and IWU, meaning that I will devote my attention to the negotiation of significant symbols “clustered” with sustainability, communication, and organizing in this case.

Locating Interpretivism vis-à-vis Other Epistemological Approaches

The distinction between functionalism and interpretivism can be drawn too easily, with either epistemic camp represented simplistically in order to augment distinctions rather than define a particular research endeavor (Cheney, 2000; Miller, 2000). Indeed, diverse traditions inform interpretivist accounts of organizational communication (Taylor, Flannigan, Cheney, & Seibold, 2001). Deetz (1996/2006) offers an alternative to Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) sociological paradigms and overly general distinctions between interpretivism and other research epistemologies. Instead of paradigms, Deetz suggests that organizational research may be sorted according to the various *discourses* appropriated by researchers. He proposes two axes for distinguishing the claims about and representations of research that characterize different discourses: (1) local/emergent-elite/a priori and (2) consensus-dissensus (see, Deetz, 1996, p. 198).

The first axis suggests the spectrum of orientations toward problem definition and theoretical deployment. The in the extremes of the spectrum,

either concepts are developed in relation with organizational members and transformed in the research process or they are brought to the research “interaction” by the researcher and held static through the research process—concepts can be developed *with* or applied *to* the organizational members being studied. (Deetz, 1996, p. 195, emphasis in original)

As I described in Chapter 1 and will detail below, my approach to defining research problems favored the local/emergent pole of the spectrum. Addressing the research problems in the manner suggested by GTM (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I consulted academic literature with potential relevance to the problems after some time in the field. My research questions reflect a kind of “meeting in the middle” of emergent research problems and extant research. I attempted to “[appreciate] how the very phenomenon [I was] studying [...] changed for the participants themselves during the course of the investigation and as a result of both planned and unforeseen interactions” (Cheney, 2000, p. 33). I envisioned my research as a process of *theorizing* rather than *applying* or *developing theory* (see Weick, 1995b).

The second axis of Deetz’s (1996) comparative research discourses is consensus-dissensus. This “dimension draws our attention to the relation of research to existing social orders. Consensus or dissensus should not be understood as agreement and disagreement but rather as presentation of unity or of difference, the continuation or disruption of any prevailing discourse. The aim of consensus-oriented researchers is “to display a discovered order with a high degree of fidelity or verisimilitude” (Deetz, p. 197). This metatheoretical position may be marked by an interest in *understanding* others’ meanings and actions (according to the spirit of fidelity) or a commitment to accurately *representing* others (according to the spirit of verisimilitude) (Mumby, 1997).¹ By contrast, scholars who orient toward dissensus in the interpretation of

organizing “concern [themselves] with understanding, explicating, and critiquing the various ways in which political and ideological limits are placed on social actors’ abilities to fully realize their identities as active participants in meaningful dialogue communities (including organizations)” (Mumby, 2000, p. 72). I am primarily consensus-oriented in this study, meaning that I favor understanding and representation over critique and challenge. However, in accordance with Deetz’s (1996/2006) image of these positions as located across a spectrum, I preserve some sense of critique and dissensus orientation. After all, “power relations affect members’ *embodied* identities (Allen, 2005, p. 46, emphasis added). And, while I am invested in understanding a plurality of meanings at play in a particular case, “by taking multiplicity and polysemy seriously, and by placing variant meanings on equal footing, [I could] become blind to the workings of power in the situation that have helped to create the very parameters for those meanings” (Cheney, 2000, p. 34). Thus, I frame my epistemological choices as *tentatively consensus-oriented*, reserving some space for critique and reflection on power dynamics and discrepancies in this case.

I am taking on a qualified form of interpretive epistemology. I aim to show how “particular realities are socially produced and maintained through norms, rites, rituals, and daily activities” (Deetz, 1996, p. 248). I do not, however, assume that my own study and representations are impartial or that the participants in my research are maintaining a harmoniously communitarian work life (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). First, I am interested in the *particularities* of this case, the local and emergent meanings created amongst participants and in relation to me, as well as in relation to the historical moment and social context. Members of the organization I studied appropriate a variety of discourses

in order to organize for social and institutional change, and it is the *unique, negotiated* production of common meaning that most interests me in this case. Second, while my focus is on the development of coordinated behavior and meanings, I strive to remain attuned to, on one hand, the *variety* of meanings at play in the case and, on another hand, the *contestation, fragmentation, and negotiation of power* in the processes I studied. The report that I present to the reader draws from interpretive epistemology and should be read as an inquiry into a socio-historically situated case of people organizing for change, with attention to the creation and co-orientation of meanings relevant to action in the service of that change.

Framing this Study as Interpretive Research

I call this study “interpretive” because I “aim to explicate and, in some [instances], to critique the subjective and consensual meanings that constitute social reality” in this case (Putnam, 1983, p. 32). I approach the case according to neo-Weberian conception of *Verstehen*, which we might simply call “understanding” or “gaining empathic insight into others’ attitudes” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 31). The term *Verstehen* has been deployed disparately and widely in social research (Martin, 2000), but I define it as a methodological “choice of means which is consciously and systematically oriented to the experience and reflection of the actor[s]” (Weber, 1997, p. 161). In other words, I want to understand how the people I study craft “organization” through communication in ways that *make sense* from their standpoints. As a participant observer, I was both party to and part of their sensemaking processes and “languages.” Still, my engagement was what we might call “partial inclusion” (Weick, 1979), since my relationships were mediated by research goals (Waddington, 1994).

A pragmatic take on *Verstehen* recognizes the productive role of the researcher as a “professional stranger” (Agar, 1996) who is invested in “making strange” that which is or seems natural to research participants in order to provide a useful account to others and the participants, themselves. My approach to generating understanding was not simply to gather up contextual and subjective data, but to occupy a position of partnership defined by *liminality*—being suspended between member and non member, insider and outsider (Jackson, 1995).

An example. In the spring of 2008, I had two separate conversations with Office staff about the meaning of work. The first discussion took place with Russell Snyder, the Director at the time, after a regular staff meeting. The meeting was shorter than usual because, as Snyder had put it, everyone was busy. After others had left the room, Snyder and I discussed his concern that Office staff spent, perhaps, too much time “just talking and socializing” with others after meetings. When I asked why this seemed to be a “problem,” he said that there was a lot of work for the Office now that it was transitioning out of what staff had come to call its “start-up phase.” He was suggesting, it seemed to me, that lots of “talk and socializing” was justified in the “start-up phase,” but questionable during the present “busy time.” He’d discussed this with reference to other employees, and I pointed out that he, too, had long informal meetings and regularly spent more than an allotted time in meetings with people in positions of authority over the Office. Part of the busyness had to do with the fact that the Office staff had just begun to compose an annual report and strategic plan.

Later in the same week, Robin Carson mentioned those documents in particular when she and I spoke alone after a steering committee meeting. She and I agreed that a

lot was “going on” on campus. She expressed to me that she felt that “internal” work on Office documents such as the annual report got in the way of her “real work.” When I pressed her on what she meant by “real work,” she said “making change” in connection with people from various parts of IWU.

During a meeting of the staff the next week, Robin brought up Chester Barnard’s approach to “effectiveness” and “efficiency,” which I had mentioned as I tried to make sense of her feeling of tension about the recent emphasis on “internal” OS work and her sense of her “real work.” Snyder was curious, and said, “Tell me more.” Robin said that I was the “expert” and should probably explain. I said that I didn’t want to be thought of as the “expert,” but that I’d talk about Barnard’s concepts and then what I saw as an interesting tension in the framing of work at the Office. I offered a loose sketch of Barnard’s thoughts about communication and coordination, and then talked about my impression of the definitions of “work” that were at play in my discussions with Russell and Robin. Did my summary of their reflections on work resonate, I asked? They provided elaborations and challenges to my interpretation, and the four of us (Lillian Valmer was involved) talked about their feeling of time-pressure, work stress, and the relative importance of certain tasks. Near the end, I realized that there seemed to be a kind of dichotomizing playing out—internal/external, real work/routine tasks, etc. Our conversation had by that time, ironically, gone on longer than we’d planned. My notes on the episode remind me that one staff person said that the discussion had “given us some things to think about,” though little sense of finality.

This example has several important features related to my methodological choices. I participated in work activities with Office staff, including attending meetings,

the informal talks afterward, mulling over drafts of documents, and planning future gatherings. As I did this, I actively marked and reflected upon episodes in which the experiences and meanings of significant features of the case came to the fore for both the participants and me. However, I did not simply “gather data about their experience” for use in academic writing. Instead, I shared my reflections with participants, compared their sensemaking, and sometimes tested or challenged their claims. As can be seen in the example above, I was sometimes called into what I thought was a difficult position—“expert” and the like—given my attempts to use my active partnership as a researcher to *participate in and stimulate* understanding from a unique perspective. Importantly, my reflection was a part of the organizing processes I studied. The participants knew I was actively seeking *multiple* perspectives and voices, and that I would synthesize, compare, and critique those perspectives.

Summary. For me, then, *Verstehen* is not merely “understanding” as an accurate representation of a social collectivity—the Office and its advocates, in this case. Instead, I shaped my methodology to *generate knowledge in/through the relationships* between participants in the study and me (Eastland, 1993). They were cooperating with one another and myself in the interest of organizational, social, and environmental change; I was involved as a pragmatic, empathic, yet challenging inquirer. Nonetheless, my attention was on understanding and interpreting the situation largely through a reconstruction of their points of view.

The Role of Critique in this Study

Later in this chapter, I characterize my fieldwork role as “active membership” (Adler & Adler, 1998). That is, I worked as a partner facilitating organizational activities

and I retained the independence necessary to make claims about and on other members.

The kind of relationship I am talking about is *defined by critique*. Brinkmann (2007)

compared this sort of relationship to Socratic dialogue:

The “researcher” (Socrates) is a *participant*, who takes seriously what his fellow citizen says (“What does he say?”)—seriously enough to disagree with it in fact—he is not a *spectator* who objectifies the conversation partner and his arguments by ignoring the normative claims of the statements or looking at them in terms of the causes (psychological or sociological) that may have brought the person to entertain such beliefs (“Why does he say that?”). (p. 1126)

My treatment of lay theory moves beyond interpretation as mere description in that I also examine the normative grounds/contexts involved, bringing it to bear upon my interpretation and presentation in this research report. So, for example, when participants claim that the OS must enlist and empower “reasonable people” to “get anything done,” my interpretation involves more than description of the presumed constituents of the category “reasonable people.” Instead, I compare the interpreted statements with other, even competing, examples and principles. I represent their perspective and consider it alongside my own, and I attempt to write in a manner that reflects this commitment. In most cases, I interpret with reference to conceptual, theoretical, and ethical constructs not immediately relevant to the situation involving these participants.

This is a kind of value-relevant critique, an informed challenge. My posture on this matter assumes that participants are

not necessarily right (nor wrong, for that matter), for opinions and beliefs are debated, tried, tested, and challenged in an open conversation, where the validity of [any given participant’s communication] does not depend on how he or she “really feels” but rather on public and intersubjective criteria—perhaps even ethical ones. (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1134)

But the function of critique in the kind of interpretation I conduct also offers a kind of clarity from the analysis of discourse from a unique research position. Fairclough (1993)

writes, “I am suggesting that such linkages between this course, ideology and power may well be unclear to those involved, and more generally that our social practice is bound up with causes and effects which may not be at all apparent” (p. 135). From this perspective, the purpose of interpretation is novel, enlightening, systematic *connection* of perspectives, rather than faithful representation of the perspectives of the persons under study.

Schwandt (1997) proposes three possible kinds of interpretation-criticism hybrids, including a “value-critical” interpretivism. He summarizes value-critical research approaches in the following way:

Judging the merit or worth of a particular practice [...] requires cultivating perceptual awareness of concrete particulars. Yet one cannot ignore standing commitments and general principles that form the traditions of various practices. Nor, because of the mutability and indeterminacy of practices, can we engage in some (relatively simple) processes of weighing alternative goals, values, criteria, and the like that reduces judgment of what constitutes good practice to calculation. Rather, we must engage in strong evaluation, judging the qualitative worth of different ends or aims of our practices by bringing into simultaneous critical examination the perceptual knowledge of concrete details of a practice and the conceptual knowledge of principles that have traditionally shaped the goods of that practice. (Schwandt, 1997, pp. 19-20)

This is an important distinction, as I am working to make sense of the means by which a group of people create understanding and transform their social situation. Rational analysis and critique is a contribution to such an endeavor (see Fay, 1987, pp. 23-26). Thus, I take up a value-critical perspective, being sure to account for my performance as a researcher of communication practices in which I am implicated (Conquergood, 1992).²

Qualitative Validity and Reflexivity

Qualitative research establishes coherence and credibility *through* the demonstration of researcher practice and active *persuasion* regarding the novelty, resonance, or practicality of the research (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993). As such, the writing-up of the research is a feature of the interpretive validity of qualitative research (Van Maanen, 1988). Here, I discuss the definitions of validity and reflexivity that should be used to assess the value of my study. As well, I briefly mention the specific means by which I worked to ensure valid interpretations and reflexive accounts of the research process.

Validity. In quantitative social science, internal and external validity are “critical evaluative constructs” for judging the merits of a study and its results (Miller & Salkind, 2002, p. 50). Miller and Salkind (2002) advise those conducting empirical research with quantitative data to “strike a balance” between internal validity, which “is the quality of an experimental design such that any outcomes or effects can be attributed to the manipulation of the independent variable,” and external validity, which is “the quality of an experimental design such that the results are generalizable to different settings” (p. 50). This construal of validity is problematic for a qualitative case study analysis involving participant observation. As such, different standards are necessary.

Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) discuss three challenges to the validity of claims made by organization researchers in the interpretive tradition. First, interpretive research is “developed from a field-dependent situation incorporating a particular social-historical context and the personal realities of the researchers as well as those actors they study” (p. 598). That interpretive research is specific and particular means that lessons

cannot be universalized in accordance with the classic virtue of scientific findings, generalization (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Second, interpretive research offers accounts, readings, or arguments about the situation studied—*interpretations*, in other words—rather than objective assessments and the absolute or universal truth. And third, interpretive research is *conceptually mediated and focused upon experience*, rather than upon direct or unmediated observation of some kind of external reality. Together, these challenges address the question of whether interpretive research can provide a “valid” account of whatever is the focus of research (Van Maanen, 1988).

Interpretive researchers working with qualitative data respond by embracing these challenges. Accordingly, many scholars *conceptualize research methodologies as an integral part of the social processes at the heart of the inquiry* (Giddens, 1979). Such a turn has at least two consequences. First, as a researcher, I am required to *document* my methods and theoretical presupposition not simply as proof that I am working within the boundaries of an established “normal science” (Kuhn, 1970). Instead, my undertaking and account of interpretive research methodology is an enactment of or contribution to the situations or phenomena being studied. As such, “I ought to be aware of the very processes by which I interpret social data, making every effort to shed light on those as well as on my ‘objects’ or ‘subjects’ of analysis” (Cheney, 2000, p. 20). As a qualitative researcher, I must do so because the research “can only be understood in the context of its use” (Rohatynskyj & Jaarsma, 2000, p.7). Interpretive research, thus, does not so much document the world as it is, but emerges from the relationship between researcher and others, both in the setting of the research (Putnam, 1983) and in the

textual mediations of research reports (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993; Van Maanen, 1988).

I am claiming that the epistemological research traditions from which I draw eschew a “scientific” notion of validity. This does not mean, however, that rendering judgment about some quality of the research is impossible. Schwandt (1996, 1997) suggests that it is misguided to seek established, generalizable, enduring criteria for determining the validity of qualitative social research. He proposes a skeptical perspective on evaluation *in and of* social research—a perspective grounded in ethics. “We must learn to live with uncertainty,” he asserts, “with the absence of final vindications, without the hope of solutions in the form of epistemological guarantees” (Schwandt, 1996, p. 59). The standard of research quality and usefulness I invite the reader to apply is *interpretive validity* (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, pp. 238-242).

I hold my research to the following conditions of validity. Most writers in the qualitative tradition anchor a modified sense of validity to the notion of *plausibility* (Glaser, 1978). Most contemporary qualitative researchers posit that multiple meaning-based realities exist in any given situation. As such, a plausible account is *descriptively accurate* of gathered data and the researchers’ field experiences, and *compared with or tested according to other possible interpretations* (see Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 242). Thus, “the meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility, their sturdiness, their ‘confirmability’—that is, their validity” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 11).

I took three measures to ensure such interpretive validity. One measure was grounding my interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations in the data. Following

GTM, my research practice involved, first, structured data gathering and, simultaneously but secondarily, ongoing and progressive data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Interpretations were made early on but held as tentative hypotheses about how I might plausibly make sense of aspects of the data. Returning to the data and research participants provided the basis for rejecting, revising, or elaborating initial interpretations. The second measure I took to ensure interpretive validity of my research findings was checking the plausibility of my findings with participants in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). That is, I engaged in member validation during my time in the field and during writing. Member validation involved “sitting down with one or more participants [to ask them what they thought] of a description, and interpretation, or an explanation” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 243). I built such checks into the routine of my interaction with participants during my fieldwork. Office employees, students, and key volunteers had the opportunity to comment upon my informal summaries of my research, data displays drawn from representative theoretical memos, and preliminary formulations of this research report. The third and last formal measure I took to ensure interpretive validity was to maintain a set of reflexive memos. This journal, for lack of a better term, tracked my evolving relationships with participants and my sense of myself in the scenes portrayed in my field notes and other data. I discuss my treatment of the concept of reflexivity in the next subsection, and I provide a more detailed account of the reflexive memos I wrote in a later section that deals with the types of research data involved in this study.

Reflexivity. Reflexivity “in the strong sense [means] that we aspire to [... take] into account all the complex and particular variations in the relationships between the

researcher, the community studied, the audience, and the mediating role of the ethnographic artifact” (Rohatynskyj & Jaarsma, 2000, p. 15). This definition of reflexivity has a few important features with implications for my study. First, reflexivity is an aspiration rather than an objective standard. Reflexivity, then, is an ongoing research practice rather than a standardized measurement for the value any given study. Second, reflexivity is an accounting of the complexity and particularity of the given research endeavor. Resultantly, interpretive researchers must embrace the polysemy of the people and contexts studied, while working to provide useful and appropriate representations and explanations. Third, the definition draws our attention to the fact that fieldwork and writing mediates and shapes research relationships.

I attempt to provide a reflexive account of the participants’ experiences, understandings, and actions in this study, including the contexts of their action. As such, I undertook specific measures to incorporate reflexivity in my research and writing work. First, I shared my research work with Office staff throughout the period of my participant observation. I did not “reveal” my findings at the conclusion of the study but scheduled consultation with Office employees and key volunteers about particular themes emerging from my investigation at specified intervals, approximately once per academic semester. I produced data summaries and fieldnote extracts, which I shared with Office staff. As a rule, participants in the research project were made aware that I would discuss my developing findings with Office employees, and any data summaries/extracts were made available to all Office employees in order to guard against coercive use of knowledge about my research practices. These member checks provided me the opportunity to discuss my research work explicitly with the most heavily involved participants.

Additionally, these practices provided the space for participants to comment on and shape my research focus and practices. I encouraged their commentary, suggestions, and criticisms in order to ensure interpretive validity, as described above, and to provide perspectives that informed my personal reflexivity work. Accordingly, I regularly composed memos that reflected my consideration of changing research relationships, developments in my understanding of the scene, and the like. I describe these memos in more detail in the section of this chapter describing types of data. For now, it is enough for me to say that these documents aided me in considering my influence in the scene, in accounting for situations that did not at first make sense to me, and enabling me to engage relationships mindfully.

As an example, I wrestled with being called an “expert” and similar labels early in the study. The Office employees and I routinely consulted one another before meetings of various groups about how I should be introduced. The loose script I preferred included a statement similar to: “I am a doctoral student conducting a communication research project with the Office of Sustainability. I’ll be taking notes. If you’re uncomfortable with me being here, please let me know; I can take no notes or can leave.” I was never asked to leave or not take notes during a meeting. In some instances, Russell Snyder would introduce me or add to my self-introduction that I was an “organizational network specialist” or a “communication expert” working with “us.” My memos on those early encounter express unease with this pattern. However, I provided less mention of—and positive response, when I do comment on—Robin Carson’s occasional characterization of me as a researcher “partnering with us.” Looking back at those memos, I note that she would usually add something to the effect of: “Brenden has been really helpful to have

around.” I used my memo writing to engage my “presence” in the scene directly. Speaking with these two directly, I was able to navigate the manifold and shifting identities I negotiated as I pursued empathetic understanding. I found out that Snyder wanted other participants to take me seriously, to treat me as an authoritative participant. (I was, after all, a *student*.) Carson, on the other hand wanted to demonstrate that I wasn’t a threat to others, and that I was sympathetic to the cause, if you will. These two perspectives are problematic, of course. But, the idea that I would be involved in a way that had me working in behalf of the Office without complication, contradiction, and liminality is more problematic. Thus, I openly discussed my evolving relationships with participants with those very participants. I did so for two reasons. First, I hoped to develop a more robust and reflexive sense of my research identities and practices. Second, I wished to ensure open and ethical relations over the course of my participation. This was particularly crucial because my approach to value-critical interpretation engages me simultaneously in the reconstruction, analysis, and critique of others’ meanings.

Summary

This study is an interpretive account of a case of organizing for sustainability-related change. My interpretive work enables a “reading” of research data from a perspective that attends dialectically to local emergent meanings and abstract theoretical/normative constructs. Similarly, I look for the convergence of meaning between participants (including myself as a participant in the field), but take up a modest position of critique in order to examine moments of dissensus, disjuncture, and resistance. I invite the reader to assess my interpretations according to the quality of my

description, the plausibility of my conclusions, and the documentation I provide of my research work and epistemological choices.

Research Questions

The epistemological and practical choices I described above shaped my creation of and responses to the following research questions.

1. What lay theories of (a) communication and (b) organization do participants employ in this case, especially with reference to the goal of “sustainability”? What are the processes by which these lay theories were enacted in communication, and with what consequences?
2. How do the participants in this study (a) talk about and (b) practice persuasion in this case? Specifically, how do they make sense of and construct knowledge about the connection (or disconnection) between their rhetorical actions and organizational/social change?
3. Regarding communication and sustainability in this case, how are ethics talked about or practiced, explicitly or implicitly, if at all?

Methods: Data Generation and Gathering

I employed research methods appropriate to interpretive research and qualitative data. I begin by defining qualitative research, and then describe my use of ethnographic participant observation and interview-based research methods. This section describes the methodological assumptions that guided my field practices, as well as the specific practices I used for the duration of the study.

“Qualitative research is [...] an approach that subsumes most of what goes by the names of interpretive, ethnographic, and naturalistic inquiry” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 19). The researcher working with qualitative data documents her/his observation of and interaction with a particular scene/situation in social life, using theoretic concepts to inform the encounter(s) as well as interpretation of data (Carbaugh, 1989/1990; Van Maanen, 1988). Indeed, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that in contemporary inquiry

the relationship between “researcher” and “researched” is *the principle determinant* of what counts as qualitative data. “Our writing,” argue Taylor and Trujillo (2001), “does not ‘capture’ the essential truth of the organizations we study. Rather, it reveals how we as writing actors are materially and symbolically involved with those organizations through a process of reflecting on and describing our relationships with them” (p. 177). And so, research using qualitative data offers, among other things, a meaning-focused “thick description” of social interaction that accounts for subtlety and complexity, including the researcher’s place in the field (Geertz, 1973).

Fieldwork: Ethnographic Participant Observation

Between July 2007 and October 2007, I conducted informal interviews and pilot observations to determine whether a long-term project involving the Office of Sustainability was feasible and met my research objectives. During that period, I proposed a working relationship with OS staff based upon the premises of “action research” (Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985).³ I would participate in the work of the Office; Office staff would serve as co-investigators, commenting on research data as I produced it and helping shape my orientation to it. The roles of “participant” and “researcher” were somewhat blended in cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1996). I would remain responsiveness to participant’s interests but maintain independence in terms of the research findings and my assessment of accumulated research data. Similarly, I would have no formal authority in collectively made OS decisions—no voting rights, if you will—and would not be involved in staffing decisions, evaluations, and the like.

I participated as an *active member* of the Office of Sustainability. “The active membership role describes researchers who become more involved in the setting’s central

activities, assuming responsibilities that advance the group, but without fully committing themselves to members' values and goals" (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 85). Burgess (1984) calls this role "participant-as-observer." The researcher cooperates in everyday life in a more than superficial way, but is explicit that s/he is conducting research without intending to "pass" as a complete member. That frame guided my formal period of participant observation between October 2007 and November 2009.

I should note that my work as a research partner was not necessarily unique. Undergraduate students working as interns or on work-study programs performed both routine functions and conducted more extensive projects under the auspices of the Office from semester to semester. Graduate students maintained long-term projects that served the Office's interest, including the ongoing collection and analysis of greenhouse gas emissions at IWU, developing a campus farmers market, and conducting research relevant to a proposed high-performance building policy. What distinguished my partnership was the duration of my engagement, and the interpretive nature of my investigation and qualitative nature of the data with which I worked.

I routinely observed the meetings of three *bona fide groups* (Putnam & Stohl, 1990): (1) Office staff, including employees, interns, and affiliated students; (2) the OS Steering Committee (SC), also called at different times the "campus sustainability network" and "working group;" and (3) the President's Sustainability Advisory Board (PSAB), a select group of University staff, students, and faculty convened, initially, by the OS's Director to advise IWU's President. During the school year, the groups met with the following approximate frequencies. Office staff met formally each week; the SC met every 1 to 2 months; the PSAB met two or three times per semester.

Office staff meetings. I regularly participated as an active member in OS staff meetings. During those meetings, I would share the progress of my research, would ask for participants' feedback, and developed activities during the 2007 and 2008 autumn semesters that engaged Office staff in assessing research data, both of which usurped a full meeting schedule. During these sessions, I would take notes on the interactions constituting the meeting, the subjects discussed, and my developing perspective on the process of organizing the Office. Some sessions engaged me more actively, and so my notes in the moment were less comprehensive and required more "filling in" when I wrote ethnographic field notes after the fact.

For example, a large portion of a staff meeting in the fall of 2007 dealt with a response to a student's email to the OS regarding the grounds watering system. Sprinklers, the student had observed, malfunctioned with some regularity during the hot parts of the year, and on some occasions quite a lot of water was wasted due to a broken sprinkler head. A response had been sent thanking the student for their notice, explaining that parts of the water system were being retrofitted with computer monitoring software to detect and fix such problems more rapidly, acknowledging the water-intensiveness of grounds maintenance, and identifying IWU staff in charge of turf management. Was this the appropriate response, the convened members of the OS staff were asked? A discussion ensued regarding whether or not the student was simply being "brushed off," had been "given good information," and such. At one point, I asked if this was a good chance to "bring somebody in" to the work of the OS, to "get them involved." I participated in and tracked the flow of the episode, much of my own sensemaking occurring after the fact while I wrote up the session as a *scene* in my field notes (see

Emmerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). This kind of active participation and reflective documentation is representative of my involvement in an array of staff meetings and events.

I also participated in the work of Office staff outside of regularly scheduled meetings. As I was able or invited by OS employees, I sat in on meetings with various campus and community stakeholders. For example, I was present for meetings with an employee in IWU's Purchasing Department, the director in charge of campus athletic facilities, members of the library staff "green team," and a partner in a local architectural firm. Such meetings were common, if irregular, between 2007 and 2009, while the OS staff negotiated their role in campus and community networks. The OS staff scheduled these meetings opportunistically, and my involvement was equally driven by opportunity and availability. I played a largely observational role in such meetings, and I told participants that I was there to "watch what was going on" for the most part, though I may ask a few questions along the way.

Finally, I participated actively in strategic planning sessions during 2008. During the summer and fall seasons of 2008 in particular, Office staff gathered a number of times to assess the development of the OS to that point, their evolving sense of its purposes and strengths, and opportunities in the future. Outside this window of time, actively participated in several days of fairly unstructured talk in January 2009. My meetings with Robin Carson and Karen Adams that month took place in response to the death of Russell Snyder in late November 2008. Adams and Carson both expressed uncertainty about the purpose and future of their work in the wake of Snyder's passing. They engaged me in sessions that dealt with the mission of the OS, the role of *advocacy* in their work, and

how they might carry on until someone could be hired to replace Snyder. These periods, in the summer of 2008 and winter of 2008-2009, involved the meetings most clearly devoted to organizational introspection and retrospection during the period of my formal observation.

While reflection was perhaps *the* principal activity of Office staff after the winter of 2007-2008, the summer and fall sessions were explicitly labeled as “time outs” to think collectively and comprehensively. In these sessions, I participated actively, sharing relevant examples from my fieldwork and providing recommendations based upon my judgments. I declined to facilitate a series of these sessions, as I felt that my personal involvement, to that point, afforded me a functionally or ethically “neutral” stance for guiding the conversation.

Let me offer a description of the sessions and my active participation in them. Three consecutive workdays in the summer of 2008 were labeled a “retreat” by Office staff. I was invited to participate in the retreat, and audio recorded work sessions with the consent of all participants. We met in a spacious and historic building reserved for such campus business, away from the Office’s headquarters. The meetings involved negotiating how to label, cluster, and prioritize activities: Did it make sense to group together student initiatives, staff initiatives, and university-wide policy initiatives—or would that kind of categorization prevent important “cross fertilization?” How did the collection of greenhouse gas emissions data relate to behavior change programs undertaken as a kind of community-based social marketing? What were the Offices’ responsibilities and capabilities in terms of communications with stakeholders within and beyond IWU? What, exactly, was the nature of change being sought by the Office?

I offered my interpretation of the others' activities, even supplied my own opinions and challenges. One day I suggested that we, as a group, might be too easily conflating behavioral and cultural change. Lillian Valmer replied that she saw them as distinct, since cultural change dealt with norms, which were *perceptions and judgments of others'* behavior. In her view, working for behavioral change need not involve normative considerations to affect material changes. (Energy could be saved, for example, by affecting the behavior of building managers, unobtrusively controlling the experiences and behaviors of building occupants.) Normative considerations bridged behavioral and cultural changes; a "culture shift" for her involved the adjustment of perception of behavior—and not behavior, itself, per se. Previously, my notes reflected my confusion with the staff's apparent collapse of "behavior change" and "cultural change" into the overarching category of "norming." This kind of contribution, testing, and dialogic change in interaction characterized my participation at events.

Steering Committee. During our first meeting in July 2007, Russell Snyder invited me to a session of what he was then calling the "campus sustainability network." The group was composed of people who had participated in the process that established the Office of Sustainability, as well as others who demonstrated strong environmental interests along the way. By the time I began my formal fieldwork, the group had been named the Steering Committee (SC). Members of the SC were recruited from diverse University departments and stakeholder groups, including Biochemistry, Campus Design, Dining Services, Computing Services, and more. Office staff conceived of the group as a set of informal advisors and, as appropriate, volunteers for specific projects and campaigns. Additionally, Office staff told me that they hoped that the SC would provide

a venue for participants to share their successes and failures, and to draw on the support and expertise of others as they pursued initiatives in their home departments or programs. Membership was not limited, and between 8 and 12 people, not counting OS employees regularly attended the meetings. The meetings usually involved briefings from OS staff, notices from participants, and an informational presentation or working session on a problem or project of significance to the OS staff.

My participation ranged during these sessions. For many sessions, I assumed a “complete observer” role, simply taking notes on the unfolding events and conversations while attempting to remain unobtrusive (Adler & Adler, 1998). As I was called upon, I would comment or ask clarifying questions, but I remained passive in most sessions. That said, all members of the SC were aware that I was present “as a researcher working with the OS,” and they had completed forms documenting their consent to participation in my study, so I assume that my very presence affected the flow of events in some.

One session deserves highlighting. In the fall of 2007, I facilitated an entire meeting of the Steering Committee. That meeting focused on the development of the OS’s mission statement. Russell Snyder had suggested that, as a “communication specialist,” I might provide a global perspective useful in facilitating an activity that helped define a memorable, direct mission statement for the Office. I told participants in the session that I was interested in working with them to develop and discuss a range of ideas. Some elements of the statements developed in that session are preserved in the mission, vision, and goal statements provided in public OS communications.

President’s Sustainability Advisory Board. The President’s Sustainability Advisory Board (PSAB) convened for the first time in January 2008. The PSAB works

alongside a number of other presidential-level advisory boards, reviewing materials on behalf of and offering specific advice to IWU's President on matters pertaining to sustainability. For example, the PSAB recommended that IWU become a signatory to the American University and College Presidents' Climate Commitment, which commits institutions to the goal of *climate neutrality*— a still vague concept referring, broadly, to an organization's capacity to regularly operate without any net effect global climate change. The PSAB has met between one and two times per semester. Its membership is composed of 13 people recommended by the OS Director and approved by the president. The PSAB was formed and, until Russell Snyder's death, facilitated by the OS Director. Now, the PSAB is a functionally independent group, though Office staff persons are intimately involved in supporting and coordinating the board's work. I was recognized, among others, as an ex officio member of the PSAB, and all participants in PSAB proceedings consented to my presence as a researcher. My role was almost entirely observational throughout, and I very rarely made comments or asked questions during sessions.

I was, however, surprised with the number of times PSAB members, some of whom also participate in the SC, approached me after meetings to discuss my reaction to what I'd observed. The president was not usually in attendance, but he did attend the first session following the August 2009 hire of Paul Abbey as Office Director. Pressed by one member about the kind and scale of changes they, as a board, could consider, the President responded that he "wanted change." "But," he said, "you've got to make me." He reasoned, "It's really the other way around": the campus has to *lead*, even though the President is often invoked as *the leader*. Following the session, the Chairman of the

PSAB turned to me and asked, a wry smile on his face, “Well, what do you make of that?” My sense was that he was pleased by the President’s openness to aggressive goal setting on the part of the PSAB, even its advocacy work beyond giving advice. I joked sarcastically, “I don’t know which of us is the cart and which of us is the horse.” I explained my unease about the President underplaying his authority, but also my appreciation of his emphasis on responsiveness. I was ambivalent. The chairman said to me, “Yes, yes. But, he [the president] seemed open. And he didn’t say *no*. He could, of course.” With that, he patted the arm of his chair, exchanged goodbyes with me, and got up to leave the room. A number of times, PSAB members, OS employees, and I would chat following these meetings, and these moments both informed my observations and constituted what might be framed as my “participation” with the PSAB.

Other settings. I should mention three other routines/settings in which I was a participant observer. First, during the fall term of 2007 and spring term of 2008, I regularly attended the meetings of a student group that had been crucial to the development of the Office. Lillian Valmer and Yasmine Meadows were founding members of the group named The Student’s Sustainability—University Network (or SSUN). Members of that group were central to the series of campus dialogues that resulted in the recommendation for a formal Office of Sustainability. Moreover, Valmer, Meadows, and others led the group of students, staff, and faculty that drafted the proposal eventually approved by University advisory boards and administrators. Valmer was an Office employee, and Meadows and other students worked directly with Office employees on a range of projects. Office staff members called SSUN a “partner group,” and I was told several times that the two entities were working “in concert.” So, I sat in

on the group's meetings at least once per month in order to get a sense of the way SSUN members made sense of their connection to the OS.

Second, I was regularly involved in informal social activities related to the Office of Sustainability. Workplace interactions extend beyond the physical confines of *workspace*, of course. What's more, work of any kind involves significant emotional and relational elements in the everyday as well as the extraordinary (see, e.g., Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008). The work of Office staff is particularly *social* in the sense that it caught up in knowing and relating to one another, as well as people throughout IWU and surrounding community. Additionally, Office employees and volunteers spent a good deal of time and effort celebrating successes, maintaining relationships outside the workplace, and gathering together in situations that did not pertain directly to Office business (though environmental matters, social change, and, yes, work at IWU were commonly topics of conversation). Moments of this sort included pizza and beer at a hangout nearby IWU after the conclusion of the first large-scale event sponsored by the OS, occasional potluck dinners with a large number of students and volunteers at Snyder's home outside of town, and a session with more than 10 people facilitated by a University grief counselor on the 1-year anniversary of Snyder's death. At these sessions, I did not actively take notes, but did track the events and my experiences in subsequent memos.

Third, I was involved occasionally in the planning and execution of specific events. Two such examples are illustrative. One is the first meeting of a statewide campus roundtable, where sustainability coordinators, advocates, and university officials met to talk about matters of mutual interest. Lillian Valmer conceived of the roundtable series,

and did the early work planning it. The Office I studied played host for the first session, which took the better part of a workday, and Valmer and I facilitated the meeting. We intended to guide those taking part in, first, meeting one another and, second, determining what they would most like the consortium to do. I also played a central role in designing a public session about “Communicating Climate Science.” The public event was part of a series supported by a University office oriented toward community education. I worked with OS staff to develop the rationale for, schedule, and host the event at the community’s public library. In these cases and others, I acted as an adjunct to the Office employees for the development of specific events. Here, I attempted to work as a “complete member [...] in order to immerse [myself] and grasp [...] the subjectively lived experience,” as well as to contribute immediate, practical assistance (Adler & Adler, 1998, p. 85).

My occasional involvement in social activities and event-based work was rounded out by my informal drop-ins and unscheduled work time at the Office. Without plans, I would sometimes remain after a staff meeting or event at the OS, writing field notes or doing other work while the others went about their day. As well, I would sometimes stop by the Office when I was on campus in order to see what was going on and chat with whoever might have been available at the time. These experiences were not planned and did not often become significant parts of my observational work, but they offered opportunities to get a sense of the flow of experiences at the Office when I might not otherwise plan to be around. I believe they suitably complemented my more regular and active participation in other areas of Office work life.

Summary. My fieldwork engaged me as a participant observer in a variety of situations. Whether I emphasized *participant* or *observer* depended upon the setting. I tracked the day-to-day work of Office employees, and the regular meetings of several bona fide groups created and coordinated, for the most part, by the OS. These activities afforded me the opportunity to assume the qualified perspective of a participant, while surveying a great variety of forms of Office work.

Interviews: Individual and Group Approaches

I conducted in-depth, moderately scheduled interviews between February 2010 and May 2010.⁴ The in-depth interviews I describe in this section were carried out after the conclusion of my participant observation, and were designed to investigate the research problems and questions of this study, which were specified between 2007 and 2009. These interviews complemented the other means by which I gathered data, as they created a unique situation for gathering interactional data (Rapley, 2001). Interviewing techniques are particularly useful for eliciting accounts rich with actors' communicative use of labels and categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In total, I conducted 20 individual interviews (i.e., one-on-one) and two group interviews (i.e., focus groups).

Individual interviews. Individual interviews took place in private meeting spaces or seminar rooms on the campus of IWU, or in locations selected by the participants. I completed 20 interviews, which averaged about 90 minutes in length. The shortest interview lasted 40 minutes and the longest interview lasted 3 hours. I began audio recording each interview after our discussion and completion of a document of informed consent (see Appendix A).

Individual interview participants were recruited in several ways. First, I recruited participants in person when I saw them in person or if I was in routine contact with them. Second, participants were recruited through the email listserv utilized by each of two groups of Office partners and volunteers: the SC and the PSAB. Third, announcements were made at routine gatherings of those and other groups involved in the OS's mission. Fourth, I contacted participants directly if they had previously expressed interest in participating in research interviews for this study. A template for recruitment statements can be found in Appendix B.

Individual interviews were guided by a schedule of questions addressing several topic areas, all of which were related to the concept of sustainability: the participant's University roles, their involvement with the Office, communication broadly construed, persuasion in particular, and ethics. The interview guide (available in Appendix C) provided a rough sequential arrangement for questions, which were developed with reference to my initial analysis of fieldwork data. Moderately scheduling interviews has several benefits for the researcher (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). One benefit is a level of precision within interviews. That is, moderately scheduling interviews allows for the researcher to phrase important questions clearly, and order questions in a way sensible to the overarching goals for the interview. As well, moderately scheduling interviews allows for a degree of similarity between different interviews, providing points for comparison during the analysis of interview data. Finally, moderately scheduled interviews afford the researcher "flexibility to delete questions or create new one as the need or opportunities arise [... making them] ideal for probing interviews" (Stewart & Cash, 2006, p. 98). Whole interviews and individual sections of interviews were planned

according to a “funnel” scheme, where initial questions tended to be more broad and open-ended, and later questions more conceptually specific (Gottlieb, 1986). I sequenced the interview questions in this way to allow participants to identify significant matters and direct my attention as a conversational partner (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 152-153).

I conceptualized these interviews as “a conversation that has a structure and purpose” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 3), but with the expectation that the interaction is an “inter-change of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest” (Kvale & Brinkmann, p. 2). The interviews were designed, on one hand, to provide rich accounts and stories related to the change processes observed in an earlier part of the study. On the other hand, I approached these interviews according to what Brinkmann (2007) calls an epistemic model of interviewing. The chief metaphor for interviews concerned with *episteme*, or “knowledge,” is the *Socratic conversation*, “a mode of understanding rather than a method in any mechanical sense” (Brinkmann, 2007, p. 1127). The use of an epistemic frame for interviews is intended as an “alternative to the standard doxastic interviews that probe for private meaning and opinions” (Brinkmann, p. 1129). The epistemic interview steers “not [to] the narrative of the individual’s life or his or her experiences, but rather people’s epistemic practices of justification” (Brinkmann, p. 1128). In other words, the interview is an interaction that *demonstrates and reflects upon* how people make knowledge claims. These claims are considered in light of particular normative dimensions of people’s experience and context. The aim is *phronesis*, as Flyvbjerg (2006) puts it; the interview involves not simply the “content” of interviewee’s experiences and perceptions, but also the

motivations, guiding values, that shape their knowledge about the organization(s) of which they are a member. In terms of specific practices, this meant that I acted as a “visible questioner” during the interviews, listening and asking scheduled questions, but also challenging claims, comparing answers, and suggesting alternatives (Brinkmann, p. 1136).

The distinction between this approach to interviewer conduct and simply asking good, probing questions in “standard or traditional” qualitative interviews is the degree to which I was an *active participant*. I believe an “epistemic interview” frame was appropriate to this study for three reasons. First, my research questions regard lay theorization of communicative events. I am interested in participants’ knowledge claims in the first place, and wanted to tease out the logics, conditionalities, and processes involved in such everyday explanation. Because my interests steered toward persuasion, I adopted a skeptical but invested perspective in order to create conditions for interview participants to *convince* me of things as well as demonstrate things to me. Second, my participant observation already involved me in events and topics being discussed in the interviews. In many cases, I had spent time with these participants explicitly mulling over and testing ideas, thinking about the effectiveness of this or that strategy. Participants were made aware that I would present alternative interpretations, including my own perspective, in order to make the interview a *conversation*. In this way, my use of the epistemic model both mirrored and extended my engagement in other fieldwork. Third, the interviews were designed after consultations with research participants. OS staff and select volunteers saw early, small-scale summaries and analysis. As such, I adopted an active role and framed the interview sessions along the lines of Brinkmann’s (2007)

formulation in order to involve participants in creating knowledge about the case, rather than simply recording their responses for the benefit of readers.

Group interviews. In May of 2010, I conducted two group interviews/focus groups.⁵ The group interview sessions were conducted in private meeting spaces on IWU's campus. The first group interview, which involved 6 OS staff members and long-term student partners, resulted in approximately 2 hours of recorded discussion. The second group interview—which involved six supporters of the Office, including students, consulting faculty, and members of the SC and PSAB—resulted in approximately 1¾ hours of recorded discussion. Each participant was made aware in advance of the other people to be involved in the session. All participants completed forms documenting their informed consent prior to the commencement of the session. When all forms were collected and signed by the researcher, the session and audio recording began.

Group interviews are a research method uniquely able to generate “data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (Morgan, 1988, p. 12). In particular, the group interview session facilitates discussion about perceptions, ideas, and judgments *without* the need “to reach consensus, provide recommendations, or make decisions among alternatives” (Krueger, 1988, p. 29). Information shared in focus groups—as well as the session, itself—may be of practical or instrumental value. Regardless, group interview data are rich and detailed accounts of interaction that compliment other observational and interview research methods (Frey & Fontana, 1991).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) note that,

As his [or her] theory develops, the analyst will notice that the concepts abstracted from the substantive situation will tend to be current labels in use for the actual

processes and behaviors that are to be explained, while the concepts constructed by the analyst will tend to be the explanations. (p. 107)

Participants in the group interviews were prompted to discuss my tentative explanations of field note and individual interview data. I used their conversation to help me to “conceptualize how [...] substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory” (Glaser, 1978, p. 72). Additionally, I facilitated the discussions with attention to the possibility that the sessions could facilitate the emergence of new understandings for the participants, as well as be a venue for problem-solving interaction. I did not shy away from this possibility, but, when appropriate, sought to encourage dialogue, experimentation, and practical discussion amongst participants (Freeman, 2006; Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Summary. Interviews afforded me specific, rich data in the form of transcribed audio recordings. During the interviews, I assumed the role of active interlocutor— I did not simply ask for opinions and probe for greater detail, but conversed with participants in a dialogue guided by the research questions. I intended that dialogue to invoke, reflect on, and demonstrate the communication phenomena under study. Group sessions were designed to engage groups of people who had previously worked/volunteered in behalf of the OS in discussion. That discussion was problem-oriented. I structured prompts and facilitated discussion to stimulate interaction about labels/phrases that I thought highlighted communication problematics for OS employees and partners. I believe that these methods were appropriate to my study, an example of applied research that “[set] out to contribute to knowledge by answering a real, pragmatic, social question” (Cissna, 1982, p. ii).

Types of Data

My research methods and techniques generated specific types of data. I will briefly discuss my creation and treatment of four different kinds: ethnographic field notes and records, interview transcripts, theoretical and reflexive memos, and texts produced by or for the Office of Sustainability.

Ethnographic Field Notes

As I conducted participant observations, I took notes on my experiences and perceptions. Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) explain that interpretivist social scientists doing observational research ground their claims in the production of texts, principally field notes. “Ethnographers develop texts,” they write, “by entering the field setting and converting the stream of field experiences into their written form, initially through field notes” (p. 596). Field notes are *inscriptions* of social experience, and

as inscriptions, fieldnotes are products of and reflect conventions for *transforming* witnessed events, persons, and places into words on paper. In part, this transformation involves inevitable processes of *selection* [... Fieldnotes] also inevitably *present or frame* objects in particular ways. (Emmerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 9)

My field notes reflect my ongoing sensemaking and reconceptualization of participants’ experiences, my field relationships, and tentative interpretations of the flow of events. Grounded theory methodologists distinguish field notes from theoretical memos. Field notes “are data that may contain some conceptualization and analytic remarks. Memos, on the other hand, are lengthier and more in-depth thoughts about an event, usually written in conceptual form after leaving the field” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 123-124). I constructed field notes from my interactions in the field. In most cases, I took “scratch notes” in the moment on bound notebooks or my laptop computer (Sanjek,

1990). Meeting situations facilitated the use of a computer, as people often consulted meeting materials on their own computers, or attempted to do “other” work while participating in the meeting. Depending on the situation— specifically, whether it required more active participation or allowed for more detached observation—I took notes of varying specificity. Some situations discouraged note taking. An example is my meeting with Robin and Karen at a coffee shop to talk about our work and experiences in the wake of Russell’s death. I transformed my *in situ* scratch notes and after-the-fact reflections into longer narratives (i.e., formal field notes) as soon as was possible. As my participant observation progressed, my field notes became more refined, and my writing work turned more to the development of conceptual memos. I describe memos in more detail in the next subsection. I distinguish field notes from theoretical memos in the following way. Field notes utilize narrative conventions, emphasize descriptive content, and contain less in the way of analytical reflection (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1998). My memos, however, feature purposeful exploration of the dimensions of the content, ordering according to conceptual categories and issues, explicit connections to theory, and—more frequently, at least, an analytic tone (Charmaz, 2006).

For this report, I drew descriptive details from my field notes. In some cases, I excerpt whole sections of my field notes. In other cases, I present revised fieldnote entries in this document. When I indicate that some statement is a quotation, it is the language used by the speaking person *as I took note of it at that time*. However, in a few cases, I will place statements in quotation marks that are reconstructed from memory and inscribed in complete field notes. When I use what might be labeled a *pseudo-quotation*, I will identify it as such. In those instances, I will preface a quotation with a statement

similar to: “Snyder then said something to the effect of...” This fact highlights that my field notes are particularly useful in documenting my dynamic relationship with the field, and will not be treated in this study as neutral and sterile descriptions of the research scene (Jackson, 1995). In my writing, I did bracket my active reflection on events with these marks: “[].” Those marks indicated to me, upon reading for analysis, that the content separated was an explicit interpretation or perspective that I imposed after the fact, or which I engaged but did not make explicit to others in the situation described. This does not mean that the narrative reconstructions of my field notes are somehow more “pure,” of course. Instead, this demarcation scheme highlights the fact that I attempted to be reflexive about my role in shaping and interpreting the ethnographic scene, especially in the writing of field notes (VanMaanen, 1988).

Theoretical and Reflexive Memos

Glaser (1978) defines a memo as “the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding. [... It] exhausts the analyst’s momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration” (pp. 83-84). I produced these write-ups from the beginning of fieldwork, according to the tenets of GTM (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). Miles and Huberman (1994) write that memos are distinct types of qualitative texts produced by the researcher in that they “make deeper and more conceptually coherent sense of what is happening. [... They are] a step away from the immediate toward the more general” (p. 72). As I accumulated time in the field and research data, my memos became more detailed and lengthy, representing conceptual focus and explanations that synthesized a greater range of data.

I produced two types of memos over the course of the study. One type I call “theoretical memos.” These memos dealt with conceptual and analytic issues in other data. For example, in the late winter of 2009, I wrote a brief memo in which I wondered about the OS staff persons’ dialectical concern for “not stepping on anyone’s toes” and “empowering others.” I made a note to return to that matter and find evidence of the tension in my field notes. Later, I constructed more detailed memos that sketched out various advocacy performances that might constitute “toe stepping,” “empowering,” and other frames for intervention. In that later memo, I referenced moments in past field notes where participants provided premises, justifications, or explanations—as when one OS employee said at a staff meeting, “We’ve got to get them [persuasion targets] to think they did it [desired action or change of mind] themselves.” These memos dealt less with describing the talk and its context than with noticing interesting problems in practice and proposing theoretically informed explanations. Elements of some theoretical memos are used in this dissertation, while many have been discarded or used to guide my own sensemaking about the organizing of the Office of Sustainability.

I also kept reflexive memos. Earlier in this chapter, I described the role of reflexivity in my conceptualization of fieldwork in this project. Reflexive memos were important components of my reflexivity work throughout the study. Along with field notes, I kept a kind of analytic journal. These entries tracked my field experiences, noting interesting or exceptional elements of my research practices and relationships. These memos usually referred to discreet events, tracking my inevitable influence in/of the scene, but I also kept track of long-term dynamics.

A brief example is representative of the role of reflexive memos in the course of my study. When Russell Snyder died, my reflexive memos reflect on my relationship with the man and how his passing shaped my relationship with the others involved in the study. I was surprised by my *personal* feeling of shock and loss, and spent a good deal of time reflecting on the evening Robin Carson called me. She told me Snyder had died while on a hiking vacation, and asked if I wanted to visit her to drink a beer and talk about it. I did. The memos that deal with that night document that I did not think first of the study and “prudence” in my research relationship. I did recall, however, my sense of unease when Robin asked me that night some version of the question: “What does this mean for your study?” I felt awkward, out of place. “*My study?*” I thought, “*This isn’t about my study.*” Upon further reflection, I considered the way in which I’d developed personal affections for the people I’d worked with for more than a year. Then I reviewed a number of my field notes to see how I’d represented the ways in which their relationships transcended social roles, as did my own. I came to the conclusion that I’d given too little attention to the personal dynamics in my field notes, and worked to incorporate that perspective more saliently in my field notes to come. Doing so was worthwhile. Karen Adams once called the period following Snyder’s death a span of time when everything seemed “on hold.” More than once, Carson and she have reflected that they felt like everything was “up in the air.” I was implicated in this feeling. One day in the OS offices, after I finished asking Adams about her thoughts on advocacy—my interest in the problematics surrounding Office stakeholders’ frames for persuasion was beginning to take shape, you see—I said something like, “Thanks for letting me take notes on this. It’s really helpful.” She said, “You’re welcome.” Then, “I trust you. You’re

not going to make us look bad.” My notes on this episode display my surprise and our conversation afterward about the comment. I explained my professional responsibilities in terms of representation, as well as my commitment to participating actively and usefully. Still, I said, I was uncomfortable about the notion that I wouldn’t “make the Office look bad.” I said I wouldn’t make her and the others “look good,” in the sense that I would not change my representation in order to ingratiate myself with them, or them with persons in positions of authority. My reflexive memos thus helped to shape my field notes and my practices in the field. I used them to consider my “presence” in the data, which was considerable, and to negotiate the politics and ethics of fieldwork as best as I could (see, Fine, 1993; Sanjek, 1990).

Both types of memos contributed to my data analysis. They guided my interpretations during that stage, and even provided hints as to how I might sort the data available in other forms (e.g., field notes, transcripts, other documents). The memos provided a fusion of field documentation and analysis in that they involved me early on in suggesting plausible explanations and frames for messages, behaviors, and episodes—which is in keeping with the principles of GTM (Glaser & Strauss, 1968).

Interview Transcripts

I conducted all recorded interviews face-to-face. I made digital audio recordings of every interview. I utilized an online file-sharing program to collaborate with a transcriptionist to create transcripts of the recordings made during the 20 individual interviews. To ensure participants’ confidentiality, the transcriptionist I hired resided in the U.S. Eastern Time Zone and had no connection to the Office of Sustainability. The transcriptionist completed a confidentiality agreement, presented as Appendix D.

Upon receipt, I reviewed the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings. I did so in order to guarantee the transcription quality and to ensure the proper use of interview texts (Poland, 1995). I corrected the transcription and added relevant detail when necessary (e.g., noting emphases, indicating pauses or sighs, etc.). I asked the transcriptionist to use verbatim transcription techniques, which preserve everyday speech terms and patterns (e.g., gonna, umm, should've, you know, etc.). This way, the data I coded were appropriately detailed and representative of the speech of those involved. The transcriptionist informed me that her technique involves minimal use of punctuation. When I was able to preserve the speaker's meaning but improve readability, I edited statements for inclusion in the final report. For example, this is an unedited excerpt from an individual interview transcript:

I try to you know my hope is that actually once the President signs off on the Climate Action Plan that we can work together to increase you know maybe the college participation in the Behavioral Program and you know that they sort of oversee a lot, I mean not that they oversee but they you know help coordinate information for like recycling and a lot of these events that go on on campus which I deal mostly with energy that you now we can sort of go out together and meet with every dean of every college on campus and sort of voice what the Climate Action Plan says and getting commitment from each dean to hopefully like give us a representative within their college to have this like Green Leader. But I think working together to do that will be a lot more effective and will you know have a greater scope that we can sort of address going out to meet them.

The paragraph below is an example of how the excerpt might be edited for inclusion in this document:

My hope is that, once the President signs off on the Climate Action Plan, we can work together to increase the college participation in the Behavioral Program and that they sort of oversee—I mean, not that they oversee—but they help coordinate information [... We] can go out together and meet with every dean of every college on campus and sort of voice what the Climate Action Plan says, getting commitment from each dean to, hopefully, give us a representative within their college as a Green Leader. I think working together to do that will be a lot more

effective and will have a greater scope that we can address [when] going out to meet them.

The edits made improve readability and preserve the basic meaning I begin the quotation midsentence, remove a number of verbal filler words, add punctuation to highlight pauses, omit conjunctive terms used as “verbal punctuation marks, remove sentences between passages of interest, and add terms needed to understand the statement in written form. On occasion, I leave verbal hesitations, tics, and other nuances in the quotation. When that is the case, I have judged that the qualification or uncertainty left in the quoted text is of great significance to the meaning intended by the speaker (or my interpretation of their speech). Unless otherwise stated, the reader should assume that all transcript quotations are edited in this manner.

I also kept field notes about the interview situations in order to document contextual factors not evident in the interview transcripts. I began recording interviews after obtaining consent from the participants. If participants indicated that something was “really important” before I began or after I stopped the recording, for instance, I made sure to keep track of the statement. Research interviews always take place in *some* context, and it is important to account for the situation *of* the interviews when analyzing the content *in* interview transcripts (Mischler, 1986). This is especially the case for my study, since my interviews were conducted following my extensive fieldwork as a participant observer.

I subjected individual interview data to close readings, which I call “micro-level analysis” in the tables at the end of this chapter. I describe my coding procedures later in this chapter. However, I should say here that I listened to audio recordings of the interviews at least twice—once while reviewing and editing the transcription, and once

while listening with a blank notepad and no transcript. Individual and group interview data provide the bulk of quotation-based evidence in this dissertation.

Office Texts

The last kind of data I gathered was documents and messages produced by Office staff and their partners during the period of my participant observation. These documents include promotional flyers, OS annual reports, strategic plans for various initiatives, and the like. In some cases, I was involved in writing or editing materials. I clearly identify the fact that I was a contributor to particular documents when they are used as evidence in this report. Other office text I gathered included email and written personal messages. Office staff regularly sent me copies of their email to others, when they felt it was appropriate to do so. For instance, Snyder once sent me his reply to a library staff person working on that organization's staff Green Team. The library employee asked whether Snyder thought it wise to strive for "conceptual precision" when defining sustainability. Snyder replied to the library employee, "From a campus perspective, environmental sustainability decisions cannot be divorced from the financial realities and the social responsibilities that comprise the mission of the university." Later, he wrote,

My conversations with others around the country and observations of practice elsewhere suggest that we would be anomalous if we took the narrower view in fostering a more sustainable campus. Furthermore, using the narrower definition in [our U.S. state] complicates our efforts because 'sustainability' becomes equated only with 'environmental' and loses other aspects that may have greater appeal while downplaying environmental aspect.

This message is representative of the significant role of electronic communications in Office employees' and partners' sensemaking about sustainability communication on campus and beyond.

I treat these documents and messages as textual artifacts. When using this term this, I rely upon the following definition: “Texts are a manifestation of discourse in the discursive unit upon which the organizational discourse researcher focuses” (Grant, Hardy, Oswick, & Putnam, 2004, p. 4). I draw upon OS documents and messages less than other forms of data for the purposes of analysis.

Summary

My approach to data gathering yielded four types of data. Field notes, transcripts, memos, and documents relevant to the work of the Office were subjected to analysis. Of course, I did not every bit of every type of data. According to the grounded theory approach to research (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 197-198), as well as common sense (Kvale, 1996), I refined my review of accumulated data by writing memos and focusing on data relevant to emergent themes as time went by. I subjected these types of data to different levels of analysis. For each research question, the different types of data received varying levels of attention: microlevel, mesolevel, and macrolevel readings. I describe my data selection and analysis procedures in the next section.

Data Selection and Analysis

I took specific but appropriately flexible measures in selecting and analyzing available data. My approach to data creation, management, and analysis followed the principles of grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). “The goal of grounded theory,” writes Glaser (1978), “is to generate a theory that accounts for a pattern of behavior which is relevant and problematic for those involved.” (p. 93). In order to identify such a relevant and problematic “core category” (see Glaser, 1978, pp.

94-96), I addressed the data produced in a combined inductive-deductive fashion. This approach “[roots theory] in data [and] not in an existing body of theory” (Glaser, p. 38). Accordingly, I undertook fieldwork to immerse myself in the work and social processes involving Office staff and volunteers, generating the data types described above along the way. Following an initial period of gaining access and establishing relationships with participants (Shafir, 1991), I began writing both field notes and memos, refining my attention and reflection deductively “in the service of further induction [such that] the source of derivations are the codes generated from comparing data” (Glaser, p. 38). Grounded theoreticians call this process the “constant comparative method” (see Charmaz, 1994, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1988, 1995). I did not simply review all available data in conducting my analysis, but rather engaged in analytic thinking early on and throughout to refine my selection and conceptualization of available data (Kvale, 1996).

Below, I sketch the decision criteria and concepts that guided my analytic process. I discuss how I chose to unitize and select data after I developed initial, tentative insights during the period of participant observation. Following that, I discuss how the selection of data was bound up with fieldwork and analysis, according to GTM. I provide an extended illustrative example. I conclude the section by providing an overview of the distinctive features of GTM, including the use of particular coding schemes and theoretical memos.

Unitizing and Selecting Data

I used GTM principles as a guide for unitizing and selecting data. During formal data analysis, I consulted and adapted a list of six data units (see Appendix E). One unit

of data that I tracked, coded, and analyzed was words or phrases commonly used by research participants. Examples include, “sustaining the sustainers,” “getting it” (as in, “s/he just doesn’t get it) “taking a systems perspective,” and such. A second way in which I distinguished “chunks” of data from one another was according to explanative or evaluative statements made by participants. For instance, in one discussion, Karen Adams, Robin Carson, and I talked about Karen’s question: “What do they [people who deny that anthropogenic climate change is taking place and requires remediation] have to lose?” The resulting discussion is rife with such statements. Robin observed that, figuratively and literally, “your whole world would change if you believed it [was true that human-caused climate change was an immediate problem deserving corrective human action].” I hypothesized that the (dis)belief one invests in climate change is caught up with other identity markers, such as membership in a political party. The conversation from that point provided a number of such judgments, hypotheses, and the like. Third, I reconstructed what we might call action routines or performances. With these labels, I single out notable *social processes* by which participants regularized interpretations (see Weick, 1995a) and/or negotiated preferred, embodied identities or identifications (see Holmer-Nadesen & Trethewey, 2000). Fourth, I also looked for stories frequently told by participants that captured some element of organizational values and ideology (see Mumby, 1987). Fifth, largely through the composition of memos, I traced relational dynamics overtime. As Office employees identified “key players” or “converts,” for instance, I examined the relational-communicative work and dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) involved over time. Sixth and finally, I took note of exceptional circumstances, acts, and such. I used these events to identify key “turning points”

contrary examples, and patterns of variation (see Bullis & Bach, 1989; Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp.113-115). As I reviewed transcripts, field notes, and other data, I looked for these six types of data unit. From the specific (e.g., common words and phrases) to the broad (e.g., performances), these frames for the accumulated data afforded me distinct “lenses” for reading and sorting.

Obviously, I did not use all of the available data in producing this dissertation. I consciously applied seven selection criteria to unitized and coded data, as I sought to gather evidence for my claims. These criteria were not rigidly applied in every case, but rather served as guides for selecting useful and discarding less useful or compelling data. The criterion I most heavily relied upon was participant identification; when participants intentionally drew my attention to a particular communication phenomenon—as if they literally or figuratively said, “Here, look at this!”—I noted the significance of the data. Second, I selected data that were recurrent in interviews and/or observations, especially when these data were representative of some routine or process relevant to the research. Third, I marked data that were unique. Unique data were those that seemed to contradict or exist dialectically with data selected for its frequency and representativeness. Fourth, I selected data that represented shifts, changes, and flows in experience and communication patterns. Fifth, I selected data that were representative of significant events and moments/utterances marked by urgency or unusual import, according to the perceptions of others or myself. Sixth, I selected data that represented emotionally charged communication or the active suppression/manipulation of emotion, regardless of the context. Seventh and lastly, I selected data that were related to particular events or

periods that figured in my retelling of the OS story. These seven selection criteria guided my inclusion of data after I conducted initial coding and analysis according to GTM.

Analysis: Grounded Theory Methodology

I utilized the principles of GTM (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to organize and coordinate my analysis of accumulated research data. As mentioned above, I employed GTM practices in each stage of the research process. As a result, I conducted certain kinds of analytic work throughout; I did not wait to conduct analysis until after all research data had been collected. GTM engages analysis as a dynamic process of examining and explaining data's various properties and dimensions (see Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 46). Glaser and Strauss (1967) called this constant comparison: "In contrast to analytic induction, the constant comparative method is concerned with generating and plausibly suggesting (but not provisionally testing) many categories, properties, and hypotheses about general problems" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 104). It "requires only saturation of data—not consideration of all available data, nor are the data restricted to one kind of clearly defined case" (p. 104). Theoretical saturation is a moment in analysis when the researcher feels as though the concepts and explanations developed from the data are plausible and demonstrable.

An example. Before I talk about specific techniques, I should provide an extended example of constant comparison and theoretical saturation from my study. In the winter season of 2008-2009, I wanted to explore more deeply the issue of "information sharing" activities the OS staff undertook. Information sharing, from the perspective of the employees, was closely, but not exclusively, tied to the image of the organization as a "clearinghouse." In doing so, I began developing categories that characterized various

relationships involved information sharing. Among other codes I found and developed, I explored these: creating data, referring, and materializing/showing.

I built these categories from specific activities or processes I observed. Under the heading of “creating data” I noted the many times that participants told me or others present that the office in charge of travel accounting “had no idea” how many miles staff and faculty flew on University-related business. The OS, you see, attempted to create a greenhouse gas emissions inventory for the entire University. This inventory would approximate how many tons of greenhouse gases were released into the atmosphere as a result of University operations. Staff and faculty airline travel financed by IWU was one component of the whole inventory. Office employees and interns equally excited and concerned that they had to “figure out” or “make up a way” to reasonably approximate the contribution of University air travel to the accumulation of heat-trapping gasses in the atmosphere. “Nobody even knew or cared” until now, one person told me. I was confident that Office staff and volunteers routinely connected the production of the greenhouse gas inventory with the image of the OS as a clearinghouse.

The sorting and refining I described above allowed me to differentiate between “data generating” and “referral” functions of the OS-as-clearinghouse. That is, I also worked through the proposition that the participants conceived of the clearinghouse role in terms of their personal knowledge of IWU’s networks of authority—knowing “who to go to,” in other words. This dimension of the OS-as-clearinghouse is summed up in a slogan that was repeated to me many times by several OS employees: “We don’t flip any of the switches, but we know the people who do.” Don’t know how you might have plastic recycling bins placed in your building? OS staff members do. Want to see more

done with organic gardens on campus? OS staff members know the people and groups maintaining and expanding the current projects. Robin Carson once told me her job was, in part, to serve as a “sustainability Rolodex.”

I compared and contrasted the data creating and reference giving dimensions of the broader information sharing category to a third dimension: materializing/showing. I noticed that Office staff frequently talked with others about strategies that would “show” stakeholders the environmental and economic costs of University operations. One idea was to place interactive “dashboards” in heavily used areas of buildings. These data displays would show the real-time and historical energy and resource use of the building. If you happened upon one of the building dashboards, you would, ideally, be able to tell how much, say, electricity was being consumed at that moment in the day, over the course of the past month, and in comparison to other seasons and years. The participants in my study frequently referred to this sort of strategy as “showing” information to people; I use the word “materializing” because it is descriptive of the meanings participants ascribed to these kinds of technologies. Their sense was that these sorts of technologies and data sets would take something seemingly intangible, distant, or ephemeral, and reveal its immediacy, significance, and utility—to “make it real,” as I heard a number of people say at various times.

To sum, I identified an interesting and problematic aspect of communication in the everyday work of the Office of Sustainability at an early point in my fieldwork. I say that the information sharing or clearinghouse role of the OS was “problematic” because the image was functional for the group but also generated tensions and complexity. I wanted to provide a conceptual representation of clearinghouse-oriented communication,

and so began to order my inductive observations. From that order, I worked deductively to see whether some of the categories of action I developed under the heading of information sharing—e.g., knowledge creating, referring, and materializing/showing—were plausible reconstructions from participants’ and my own points of view. The point at which I was tentatively satisfied with the plausibility of this ordering of concepts may be called *theoretical saturation*. I had not referenced all data, but had brought a number of examples to bear on the categories posited. And so, through a mix of induction and deduction, I proceeded tentatively from this one insight through other matters important to the study.

Coding for conceptual order. Ultimately, the analytic work of a grounded theory methodologist is aimed at “conceptual ordering,” which “entails not only condensing raw data into concepts but also arranging the concepts into a logical, systematic explanatory scheme [...] considered from many different angles or perspectives” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 56). Conceptual ordering thus involves the development of categories of data that are posited and labeled by the researcher with types of “codes.” Information sharing, knowledge creating, referring, and materializing/showing, discussed above, are examples of such codes. Using GTM meant that I developed codes iteratively, so that characterizations and hypotheses *from* research data were grounded *in* research data. The process of conceptual ordering and theoretic explanation involves abstraction and simplification, of course. Nevertheless, I strove to remain responsive to the complexity of the data and the context in which it was produced (Clarke, 2005). Similarly, I did not seek mere order in my research data; I remained attentive to alternative explanations, contradictions, and tensions, as well (Charmaz, 1994). The point of this is to provide

plausible explanations of research data that are not unnecessarily reductionist or simplistic.

Two phases of analysis may be identified in the research process I undertook. The first phase began at the commencement of my fieldwork and ended with the design of the formal research interviews. That phase allowed me to refine my research questions and generate initial, tentative codes and hypotheses, which I then brought to the design and enactment of analytic methods in the second phase. The second phase began with the start of individual research interviews in February 2010 and continued until the completion of the dissertation. The processes of coding and sorting data that I describe below apply to both phases, though greater refinement and theoretical investment, as well as closer reading of the accumulated data, characterized the second phase.

During and after both forms of my fieldwork (i.e., participant observation and interviewing), I coded and compared research data. There have been a great many explanations of codes and coding processes associated with GTM, but my explanation will involve those discussed in Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) summary (see pp. 218-223). The analytic process of coding, itself, as composed of several stages: initial or tentative analysis, integration, and dimensionalization. The first stage, the initial analysis, is characterized less by *explanation* than it is *exploration*—more by *reading and listening* than *writing*, if you will (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 163). It is of particular importance to remain responsive to the data, and to change codes as needed. Impressions guide the overall reading of gathered data (Glaser, 1978, p. 15). The second stage, integration, involves the researcher collapsing and comparing codes according to emergent “principle[s] of integration” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2008, p. 221). Integration involves

frequent revision and may occur in several “waves” (Lindlof & Taylor). The third stage, dimensionalization, involves the researcher in fleshing out the various “attributes and characteristics” unique and common to the categories generated during integration (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 222). Selective sampling of research data enables the testing of conceptual frameworks “by collecting data which proves or disproves the framework hypothesis. Concepts which cannot be supported by the data are dropped [or reconceived]” (Stern, 1994, p. 122). Theoretical saturation should, ideally, mark the end of dimensionalization.

Types of coding loosely correspond with these three stages in data analysis. *Open coding* involves “breaking data apart and delineating concepts to stand for blocks of raw data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). It is common for researchers to produce a great many open codes as they initially wade through research data. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note that open codes can either be (1) established by the researcher to distinguish the substantive elements of data or (2) developed according to “terms used by the social actors themselves” (p. 220). The second type is *in vivo* codes. Recall my discussion of the group interview schedule, above. In that case, I utilized *in vivo* codes to establish prompts and guide discussion. The second stage of my analysis involved axial coding of the data, “crosscutting or relating concepts to each other” (Corbin & Strauss, p. 195). *Axial codes* may demonstrate causes, conditions, strategies, and consequences associated with certain actions or processes identified in the open codes. Put another way, axial codes posit relationships between and amongst open codes in order to accord the data greater coherence. Finally, *theoretical coding* works to provide dimension and completion to the previously developed coding schemes. In the final stage, codes are intended to “provide a

way of thinking about data in theoretical rather than descriptive terms” (Stern, 1994, p. 124). These codes were pursued and developed with greater purpose, according the intuitions I had when comparing the ongoing coding process with my research questions and objectives (see Strauss, 1988).

Summary. As I collected data and plausible codes proliferated, I heeded Lindlof and Taylor (2002): “Sometimes a simpler set of codes, designed only to navigate the data more easily, is the better way to proceed. [...] The code [...] is not the interpretation” (p. 222). Thus, my interviews were designed and enacted *according to comparisons and hypotheses I made during and as a result the observational phase of my fieldwork*. The interview data are more conceptually focused by design, and I analyzed interview data on a microlevel, as described above. I scrutinized participant observation data at a mesolevel or macrolevel, sampling data for representative themes, stories, episodes, and uses of figures of speech. I emphasized elements of the initial stages of analysis more during the observational phase of the study; I emphasized integrative and theoretical analysis during the interview and composition phases of the study. As a result, my analysis chapters feature interview data more prominently than other data. In total, my approach to data analysis involved an adaptable yet disciplined analysis of multiple types of data, guided by an interpretive approach to answering this study’s primary research questions.

Conclusion

Case study research is particularly useful for placing theory and practice in conversation (Hammersley, Gomm, & Foster, 2000). My aim for this case study is to “develop theoretical frameworks [...] that] inform and enrich the data and provide not only a sense of the uniqueness of the case but also what is of more general relevance and

interest” (Hartley, 1994, p. 210). Yin (2009) explains, “You would use the case study method because you wanted to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding encompassed important contextual conditions—because they were highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (p. 18). This is particularly relevant to the broad and embracing discourses of sustainability. Still, understanding the communicative work that goes into negotiating organizational sustainability can be widely useful so long as claims are made with reference to the context from which data were gathered. The design of this project allowed for the collection of data that offer several perspectives on the case (see Burgoyne, 1994, pp. 195-196). The result is this interpretive study of the Office of Sustainability and participants’ engagement of sustainability discourses, advocacy in the service of sustainable organizing, and communication ethics.

Notes

¹ I am, of course, oversimplifying this dichotomy for the sake of clarity. *Both* reasoned understanding and appropriate representation are researcher's burden in consensus-oriented research.

² Given that I cite several scholars in this section who are associated with the traditions of Critical Theory, I should clarify my use of the terms critical and critique. I am not using the work of theorists aligned with the critical projects of Marxism, varieties of feminism, postmodernism, and such as the basis for my methodology or theory building. I am not *primarily* interested in the critique of power and power's effects in organizations and societies. Here, I am using the terms critique and value-critical to describe my reflection upon data. I do not seek a "neutral" interpretation of participants' meaning making. Instead, I compare and contrast what I interpret in the research data with normative ideals relevant to the case and do, on occasion, offer my own judgments. These activities, which are complementary to what is more commonly associated with interpretation, are what I call critique and criticism.

³ In the end, I did *not* carry out this study as an action research project. While I proposed that possibility to the employees of the OS, it was the alternative we found to be most feasible and descriptive of the relationship we eventually developed.

⁴ During the period of my participant observation, I conducted "ethnographic interviews," which are open-ended but purpose-driven interviews conducted *in situ* (Spradley, 1979). The ethnographic interviews were unstructured and conducted informally in response to recent events in the field. For the most part, they served to orient my observations in the field, enrich my field notes, and aid my exploration of tentative interpretations of research data.

⁵ I use the terms "group interview" and "focus group" interchangeably.

CHAPTER 6

ADVOCACY

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss lay theories of *advocacy*. Specifically, I analyze and discuss Office of Sustainability (OS) staff members', volunteers', and partners' theorizing about persuasion. To do this, I draw most heavily on transcripts of in-depth interviews with 20 participants. In Chapter 4, I conceptualized lay theorization in terms of *interpretive repertoires* (IRs) used in metacommunication—or, as Craig (1999) puts it, “the practical metadiscourse of everyday life” (p. 121). I now use that perspective on lay theorizing in order to trace the IRs that participants use when making claims about advocacy-related communication.

I identified three IRs involved in participants' lay theorization of advocacy: (1) *the directive repertoire*, (2) *the expressive repertoire*, and (3) *the representative repertoire*. In reconstructing these IRs, I find that participants regularly underplay, diminish, or even denigrate the role of explicitly persuasive communication in sustainability organizing at Intermountain West University (IWU). This is particularly important for an office that has labeled itself a pan-campus advocate for sustainability. The discussion in this chapter is significant for organization studies scholars because previous research on *intraorganizational advocacy* has focused more on lay persons' rhetorical strategies and techniques (e.g., Dutton, Asford, O'Neill, & Lawrence, 2001; Gossett & Kilker, 2006; Kassing, 2009; Sonenshein, 2006) than on persons' *theories or*

metadiscourses of persuasion. This is a slight but important shift in perspective on organizational communication.

This chapter has four remaining major sections. I begin the chapter with a brief discussion of the connotations of *persuasion and advocacy* at the research site. I then carefully explain how the theory and methodology described in Chapters 4 and 5 ground the analysis in this chapter and the remaining chapters. Following that, I provide substantial evidence of the three advocacy-related IRs relevant to this case. I close the chapter by considering the problems of participants' lay theorization of advocacy.

Persuasion and/or Advocacy

During participant observation, I realized that others did not share my conception of persuasion. My work as a doctoral student attuned me to many perspectives on persuasion. For me, the term served an analytic function—specifically, labeling a particular genre of or approach to communicative activity. Many participants in this study spoke of persuasion pejoratively or, at the least, expressed reluctance at using the term to talk about their communication. This pattern was similar to the treatment of *rhetoric* in colloquial language; lay uses of the term frequently define rhetoric, explicitly or implicitly, as inaction, Machiavellian deception, impotent fantasizing, or the making of insincere promises. Among those I observed during the study, *persuasion* was a term similarly associated with untoward or undesirable communicative action.

Participants more frequently adopted the term advocacy. In the proposals formulated soon after the 2006-2007 campus forums, the OS was proposed to be a “pan-campus advocate for sustainability.” Between 2007 and 2010, I would hear this description provided frequently when OS employees explained their roles at IWU. When

I spoke with Lilian Valmer, one of the first OS employees, she described the broad range of “roles” the OS ended up playing in its first year. Among those she was “really pleased with” were: “the mentorship role that we have for student groups, even campus groups like green teams;” “research and leadership roles” in initiatives to reduce the campus’ environmental impact; and “this sort of advocacy role, and maybe even a ‘watchdog’ kind of position.” The ambiguity in her statement about advocacy is not accidental. After all, she describes advocacy as a “sort of” role played by the OS, in her words. Her caution on this reflects broader concerns amongst sustainability officers and their supporters at IWU regarding the role of communication that seeks influence or change. Moreover, participants in this study struggled to distinguish persuasion from advocacy. This is what Valmer, who lauded the OS’s developing “advocacy role,” told me about persuasion:

I think maybe the connotation of ‘persuasion’ that I’m a little bit leery of still is manipulation. And when people talk about ‘truth.’ It’s that sort of idea of someone holding that ultimate knowledge about how something *should be* and imposing that on someone else. I’m very much an avid supporter of freedom of thought. So, people can very well choose to go do something that will damage their own health, and we do. All the time. But at a certain point, when you look at how it’s going to impact the greater good, there are certain areas where you draw the line, and that’s where laws and regulations come into play. It’s like, “Listen, you can go smoke outside on your own time, but you can’t smoke in my office space because that’s impacting all of our health.” So, I feel like that kind of, um, maybe—let me think of a word for it. [*Pause.*] That’s not really an instance of persuasion, like telling someone that they’re a bad person because they’re smoking or something. I guess [that example] would be a different way to look at it [i.e., persuading], and not the way that I think is *useful*. But saying, “This is the situation and we’re going to set up some safeguards here so that the greater good isn’t damaged.” So, a tragedy of the commons kind of frame, for me. [...] Um, maybe that’s the difference between manipulating something and facilitating change. So, recognizing that there’s certain goals and things that we want to get toward and changing behavior in a constructive, positive way which is voluntary, but influenced, is a good form of persuasion in my eyes.

Advocacy emerged in OS employees' and volunteers' discourse as the principal label for the "good form of persuasion" described by Valmer.

The Variability of Advocacy in Context

Participants in this study used the term advocacy in various ways. I want to acknowledge that variability and I want to point out that advocacy was the most prominent alternative to the term persuasion, though participants developed a host of synonyms. For clarity's sake, I use advocacy as an overarching term. Still, my discussion is focused on its *emic* meanings—that is, its meaning in the context of the research site. I acknowledge the variability of advocacy in participants' talk.¹

While participants' implicit definitions of advocacy frequently conformed to Aristotle's (2004) definition of rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (p. 6), they distinguished advocacy in a variety of ways. For instance, I asked Karen Adams, an employee of the OS, about the "balance" between information giving and advocating in her work on campus. She responded: "Is it really different? I don't know. [...] I mean, I guess the hope for advocacy is to create action, but I think part of advocacy is informing people—so it's intertwining that way." Other interviewees concentrated on audience-centeredness more than action-orientation when defining advocacy. They spoke of "finding out what's important" to people and crafting messages that have "emotional resonance" for the intended audiences. A member of the Office's Steering Committee (SC) went so far as to tell me that advocacy was principally about "*listening*,"

[... that is, about] figuring out where a particular person is at or where an organization's at in terms of what their goals are and what they're going to move towards. And if a student comes into see me, I want to really say, "What's

happening with you? Tell me, why are you here?” Get some information about what their needs are and listen to them and try to think—okay, from my vantage point, what would be the next place they could move or what would be helpful?—and then collaborate and discuss together, “Is this what you need?”

During my ethnographic participant observation, OS employees and partners would frequently advise one another to “know where others are coming from,” “understand their perspective,” and “start from where they’re at.” A different employee, a very involved member of the President’s Sustainability Advisory Board (PSAB), said to me: “I would say that the sacred cow’s money.” He was concerned by this and mentioned his support for a “triple bottom line” approach to university management several times during our interview.² Nevertheless, he insisted that appeals to fiscal savings were essential to sustainability advocacy at IWU. During my fieldwork, people often spoke in clichés and commonplaces that supported this position, too. They insisted that investments in technologies and social programs have a short “payback” or that “it all comes down to money” when talking about sustainability to people in power. While people did not always speak of advocacy directly when making such statements, it was usually clear that the statement was meant to discipline *how* others ought to conduct advocacy.

Thus, when participants spoke of advocacy during my fieldwork and interviews, they defined it both directly and indirectly. Moreover, they defined it in different ways; some individuals concentrated on communicative relationships while others concentrated on the messages’ content. This variety—from person to person, from situation to situation—is to be expected. As I explained in Chapter 4, that is one reason to conceive of lay theorizing as the structuration of a set of interrelated IRs about a subject.

Explanation of Method and the Reconstruction of Interpretive Repertoires

In the next major section of this chapter, I will provide evidence of 3 IRs at work in this case. As described in Chapter 5, I generated data through ethnographic participant observation, 20 in-depth interviews, and 2 approximately 2-hour focus group sessions. I draw mostly from interview transcripts for this section's representative examples and other evidence. In-depth interviews' transcripts provided me the best data for capturing long-form, nuanced metacommunication. During my ethnographic participation, I was frequently able to ask others to comment on their assumptions and claims about communication. However, it was also regularly the case that such discussions were sidelined because my questions were (potentially) off topic or distracting for the convened group's task. One-on-one interviews enabled focused discussion of metacommunication and, importantly, recording and transcription of the interaction. Nevertheless, my analysis proceeded according to grounded theory methodology. Based upon preliminary analysis of my ethnographic field notes, I read interview transcripts with an eye toward participants' characterization of communication, especially varieties of persuasive communication. I analyzed interview transcripts carefully and closely. During open coding, I treated specific terms and phrases as the primary units as analysis. As I proceeded through to the later stages of coding, I concentrated primarily on the most relevant complete statements or (in terms of the transcripts) paragraphs. Below, you will notice that I rely on fairly lengthy excerpts from the interviews. These larger units of analysis are more appropriate to documenting interpretive repertoires in the participants' lay theorization of advocacy.

Explanation of theoretical perspective. Recall that I described the relationship between individuals' claims and IRs as "structurational" in Chapter 4 (Banks & Riley, 1993; Giddens, 1984; Poole & McPhee, 1983). This means two things at once. First, IRs are constituted or established by people's claim making. Remember, I defined theory as definitions of a system, claimed to apply to real systems. So, interpretive repertoires are patterns in what people claim defines a particular system. In this case, the system I am interested in is sustainability advocacy. Second, IRs are structurational in that they provide discursive resources and rules for making knowledge claims. To make sense of this, focus on the word *repertoire*. Most lexical definitions associate "repertoire" with sets or stores (i.e., things in held in reserve) of skills, actions, or strategies. IRs provide patterned ways for people to talk about something. The patterns emerge from social interaction, common sense, and other processes of normalization. In that way, IRs are *simultaneously* ready-made for people's claims about situations *and* flexible or interchangeable enough for people to make different claims (in the same or differing situations). This is the dual, or structurational, nature of IRs: they are "built up" from people's recurring knowledge claims, but they also affect when and how people employ certain claims in various situations (or in response to different demands/objectives).

An example. So, lay theories are knowledge claims, but they are best interpreted according to their relationship with certain repertoires of claim making. The analyst's job is to *reconstruct* IRs in order to explain patterns in people's lay theorization. To make this conceptualization clear, let me provide a very brief example before proceeding further. So that I do not confuse my discussion of advocacy, I will focus here on

ethnographic data about employees' lay theories of the OS's organizational relationship with the President's Office.

On occasion, OS employees would make claims akin to these: (1) "The President has the ultimate say," and, (2) "We've got to make sure this sounds good to the President."³ There are many claims related to the first statement. Among those I heard on IWU's campus are: "I think we can get away with this as long as none of the higher-ups think it goes against their interests," and, "If we get the President's endorsement, it will give other people license to say sustainability is part of their job." What these claims have in common is their implication (or declaration) that the President's Office maintains a fundamentally hierarchical, authoritative relationship with the Office of Sustainability. As an analyst, I noticed this pattern and began to collect examples. Participants have used claims like these in order to encourage sustainability advocates to act as subordinates, to forestall or catalyze action, to explain failures or changes in strategy, and such. My role as an analyst is to make sense of these claims and their uses *in situ*. Per the approach I developed in Chapter 4, I could argue that this collection of claims constitutes a *hierarchy repertoire*.

Let us turn now to the second primary claim above. Related to the imperative to "make it sound good to the President," participants would often encourage "putting it in his terms," and they would orient themselves according to "what the President has said." The logic guiding this set of claims is captured in the cliché: "speaking his language." (IWU's President at the time was a man.) We might label this *the mimicry repertoire*. It focuses our attention more on the power of linguistic patterns, frames, and discursive devices than does the hierarchy repertoire, which draws our attention to bureaucracy,

top-down authority, and commands. The use of one set of claims or the other is consequential. People making claims consistent with one will usually employ *assumptions, frames, action orientations, and information* also associated with that repertoire. A range of IRs could make for a variety of ways of constructing knowledge about the organization's situation vis-à-vis the President's Office.

It is important for me to point out that the same person might employ either of these repertoires in different circumstances. In other words, I might make claims consistent with the hierarchy repertoire in one situation, but make claims consistent with the president's language repertoire in another. It is also possible that I use both repertoires in just one situation. Recall that lay theorization is complex and *occasional*. Furthermore, everyone experiences a tension between their interactional guidelines or scripts and the way in which they actually deal with situations, especially new or multidimensional situations. Moreover, lay theories are usually voiced as stylized expressions rather than thoroughly reasoned arguments (Hewitt & Hall, 1973). The researcher, then, can provide some clarity by interpreting the IRs involved in people's lay theorization.

Interpretive Repertoires of Advocacy

In this section, I identify and discuss three IRs participants used to talk about advocacy: the directive repertoire, the expressive repertoire, and the representative repertoire. Again, these repertoires are meta-discursive in the sense of being *about* or *dealing with* language. I am not necessarily claiming that participants really give direction, are inherently self-expressive, or actually communicate sustainability solely in terms of facts. Instead, I am demonstrating *the patterned ways in which participants*

make claims about *advocacy*. Nonetheless, these repertoires can influence participants' engagement in communication and whether they opt to call their communication an act of "advocacy." As I will demonstrate, the three repertoires tend to *favor* the descriptive, expressive, and representative functions of communication, and *disfavor* the influential and constitutive functions of communication.

The Directive Repertoire: "Telling People What to Do"

I am calling the first IR *the directive repertoire*. The directive repertoire has a lot to do with *what participants' advocacy was not or should not be*. The cornerstone of this repertoire is the colloquialism "telling people what to do"—as in, "We can't [just] tell people what to do." I heard assertions like this one at many staff and volunteer meetings. As Searle (1975) explains, directive communication includes "attempts [...] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. They may be very modest 'attempts,' as when I invite you to do it or suggest that you do it, or they may be very fierce attempts as when I insist that you do it" (p. 355). The examples I provide below (1) link advocacy to directive communication; and (2) generally demonstrate skepticism, caution, or rejection of authority-based interaction (see Lukes, 1978).

Three themes characterize the directive repertoire. First, ideal sustainability advocacy is portrayed as a milder, less direct, softer sort of advocacy. Second, participants insinuate or state that advocacy might be the unjust use of communication to control others. Third, directive advocacy is usually compared to inefficient, combative, or manipulative communication and organizing.

Characteristics of the directive repertoire. A passage from my interview with Karen Adams, who was an Office staff member between 2008 and the end of this study,

provides a good example of the directive repertoire. I told her to imagine that she was speaking to the current director of the OS, Paul Abbey. I then asked: “What advice would you give him in terms of advocacy to make the campus sustainable?” She replied:

I told him the other day that sometimes you have to convince people that it was their idea in the first place. [...] I was also going to say be persistent because sometimes you go to speak with someone and they say no. For example, we’ve been trying to get the budget managed through the [University’s service learning center] for the farmers market and it’s been months. I mean, [...] the market ended in the first week of October and we got no and no and no both from Facilities Management and the [Service Center] and Human Resources and over and over and over again. And then Aldo just called [the director of the Service Center] and had this conversation. All of the sudden everything’s okay and they’re going to take it and they’re excited about it and I don’t know what it is but sometimes it’s just about being persistent in your advocacy for something because maybe it’s not the right time to ask but you just keep asking even if it’s annoying.

It is important for me to highlight one feature of Adams’ account. She treats the turn of events as an “all of the sudden” change, one that resulted from “being persistent” and patient. Also notice how Adams characterizes the change as getting beyond a “no.” Overcoming resistance or reluctance—getting past “no,” in other words—requires “sometimes [convincing ...] people it was their idea in the first place.” At first glance, this is the opposite of directiveness; partners of the Office attribute their motivation to their own inspiration rather than sustainability officers’ advocacy.

A strategy used to arrive at such an outcome, Adams said, was “just keep asking even if it’s annoying.” I responded: “And it’s asking, not telling?” She said:

It’s asking. [...] I don’t think we tell anyone necessarily to do anything. Sometimes, we may use kind of words like “this must be done,” or “this is the right thing to do,” or “we really need to do this.” These are the type of things that we have to do to reach this goal. But we don’t have the, you know, gun to anyone’s heads, saying, “do it or die.” It’s not like that. We’ll point out other people’s guns. Like, for example, when the state came out with the LEED⁴ [...] certification requirement for all new construction, no one believed anyone that it was actually a policy passed through and that this was what needed to be done from now on. It took meeting after meeting of sitting down and saying, “No

really, this is a gun to your head. You have to do this,” and actually explaining step by step what the process would be for this new requirement before anyone paid any attention. But we don’t put guns to people’s heads.

Notice what Adams says the Office staff *is* doing. They are pointing out the facts of the matter: “No really, this is a gun to your head.” They are providing information about the situation, including “actually explaining [processes] step by step.” While Adams does not challenge the gun-to-the-head metaphor, she emphasizes one of two things: (1) the Office’s role as supplicant or (2) that any advocacy involving directive language should not be delivered as a threat.

In fact, images of *force and violence* were quite often associated with lay theories that cast advocacy in terms of directive communication. One long-term student volunteer/intern told me:

I think that they can’t, they can’t steamroll their way into people’s minds or hearts. And they can’t assert that their idea is the best and only idea. They have to allow people to um, to disagree with them or to have other ideas. And that’s okay, but they can’t just, “Well, we’re the Office of Sustainability and we’ve studied this for years and we know best.

In addition to “steamrolling” and coercing, my field notes document participants’ comparison of “we know best” advocacy with “forcing ideas” on others, “controlling” them, “pinning them down,” “backing them into a corner,” and “stepping on their toes.” Only on rare occasions did a participant imply that directive communication, characterized in this way, was desirable or necessary.

Regardless, the centerpiece of the directive repertoire is this claim: *giving instructions/orders is an undesirable, ineffective, or immoral approach to advocacy*. Take, for instance, a statement made by a Facilities Management staff member who served as Interim Director of the OS after Russell Snyder’s death. Below, he explains

why sustainability advocates cannot “tell people what to do” or “champion a particular cause.”

If I take on one cause then all these other causes will be squashed or lost, and we’re trying to move a lot of things forward collectively as rapidly as possible. And once the Office takes a stand, it can be detrimental of all the other possibilities. It’s somewhat difficult for certain people to buy into that because there are people who want to lead and, you know, get puffed up by knowing that everybody’s doing it their way. And there are some people who don’t want to make decisions and want to be told what direction to go. Both of those types of people will be a little bit frustrated at times with the approach that we’ve been taking, but I’m [okay with that].

The interviewee suggests that directive advocacy would threaten some of the many causes under the umbrella of the “sustainability movement.” In a move that seems to contravene clichés about how to get things done quickly, he argues *against* giving directions, since that would hinder sustainability advocates’ attempts to “move things forward collectively as rapidly as possible.”

This sentiment is shared by many of the participants. Usually, they point to the structure or culture of the university as a practical challenge to directive advocacy. For example, one particularly active member of the PSAB told me. “This is [...] such a bottom-up kind of campus, rather than a top-down and all-around. It’s a distributed model, a disorganized distributed model of the way things work.” Given that, the OS should not engage in controlling behavior. The term controlling “has a negative connotation for me,” she said. When I asked her to explain, the PSAB member told me that

[...] I have no right to control you. You’re an adult. You’re an intelligent person and really the only way I can be assured of controlling you is putting chains or shackles [on you], or putting you in a box, or stop you from doing [something], and that is against principles that I have. But, I can share information with you, facilitate you doing things. I mean, lead, model, coordinate, model.

To that point, I had not discussed “modeling” communication with her—or other interviewees, for that matter. I asked her: “Meaning [what]? By modeling do you mean draw up a map of [something] or do you mean, uh, modeling in the sense of leading by example?” Her response was direct and immediate: “Leading by example.”

Note how the PSAB member positions “controlling” communication as “shackling” others. Instead, she favors “modeling” desired behavior and “sharing information.” Her claims about controlling, commanding, and insisting are associated with the directive repertoire. Participants in this study overwhelmingly wished to steer the Office away from advocacy as directive communication. By contrast, repertoires emerged around the other two frames for advocacy provided by this interviewee. The first, related to leading by example, I call the *expressive repertoire*. The second, related to sharing information, I call the *representative repertoire*. I discuss these below. I want to note here, however, that participants’ *preference for those other repertoires of advocacy largely stemmed from the negative connotations of “telling people what to do.”*

As I have shown above, directive advocacy may be, metaphorically speaking, putting a gun to someone’s head, championing one cause instead of others, and putting someone in a box. Interviewees also told me that directive-like communication “creates enemies” (in the words of one student intern) and is “inefficient” because it creates “blowback” (according to a consultant working with IWU on energy efficiency). A member of the SC told me that, based upon her previous experience in the private sector, directive advocacy is a “really easy [way] to make [things] fail.” She explained:

All you have to do is say, “Yeah, okay, we’re doing it. Yeah, we’re doing it.” But, you know, subversion happens all over the place, so mandating something that people really don’t believe in and don’t want to support—what are you going to

get? You're going to get a lot of people, and especially in a university setting, you're going to get a lot of people who will find a way to be subversive.

In part, then, participants also use the directive repertoire to claim that advocacy of this sort invites resistance and contestation.

I end this subsection with a long excerpt from my interview with Robin Carson, the sole staff member who worked at the OS throughout the duration of my study. Carson explained to me why she thought the two full-time directors of the Office, Russell Snyder and Paul Abbey, were skilled sustainability advocates:

Russell would come in [during meetings with other campus officials] and ask a lot of really good questions. He [didn't] want to threaten anybody, and I think Aldo will ask a lot of questions—and in some ways I've watched him almost say, "I've asked too much" or "I want to hear what you have to say." You know, almost back off from a level of expertise [...] sort of [to say,] "This isn't necessarily my decision or my place." [...] The flip side of this is to be willing to stake out some sort of boundary. There's so much value in drawing people out and finding out their drivers and values and perhaps things they don't normally or aren't normally encouraged to share professionally or whatever, and I think that's often been [Russell and Myron's] style, both of theirs. But they also, as directors [of the OS], had an enormous knowledge base and wisdom; [and] that, I think, is important to be willing to really put forward, rather than to sort of say, "Well I don't mean to ..." There's a point at which, I think, it's worth getting beyond our "start-up mode" and [...] claim some moral high ground, as it were. There's a sort of a self-effacing part [of their advocacy]—like, "Well, we're just one of me"—that I've seen played out, especially when someone will react negatively or seem taken aback by [Office employees' communication, given,] again, [our] place within more of a power hierarchy than a knowledge hierarchy. And I get this. I hear this, too, about the leadership, and our place within [the] Facilities [Management division of IWU], and the style of the VP's, and that sort of thing: they can only handle so much, like [only] so many "curve balls" at a time. Basically, that's not the way they're accustomed to thinking or approaching things. So, [she says, acting as if she is one of the directors of the Office], "Well, in my weekly meetings [with supervisors] I can't bring up. I'll have to sort of *toss out an idea* and then come back to it a few weeks later. [...] No more than three new things a week!" And in the context of what we're trying to do there is *so much* going on. It's an interesting sort of dance, and this is why I'm very pleased that people of Aldo and Russell's caliber are able to handle it, because I have no patience with that. And so that's why I recognized early that I was not the right person to sort of step into any sort of director role. (Interviewee's emphasis)

Carson's characterization gets at the heart of the directive repertoire's ambivalence regarding advocacy. On the one hand, IWU sustainability advocates don't "want to threaten anybody." On the other hand, IWU sustainability advocates struggle to "stake out some sort of boundary" that distinguishes the acceptable from the unacceptable (i.e., sustainable and unsustainable). Advocates "want to hear what you have to say," but also struggle to "really put forward" progressive visions of sustainability and "claim some moral high ground." In our day-to-day conversations, Office staff and I regularly spoke of "getting beyond our 'start-up mode,'" as Carson put it, but we also spoke warily of University administrators. Paul Abbey said on several occasions that his first few months at the Office were valuable because he could take action, make statements, and the like and wait to "get his hand slapped." Carson, of course, points out how such straightforwardness can become something more akin to "tossing out an idea" rather than, say, taking a stand or advocating for a particular policy. This pattern of moderation, if you will, is characteristic of claims in the directive repertoire.

Summary. Thus, the directive repertoire largely consists of claims about *how advocacy cannot or should not be done at IWU*, according to the participants. The directive repertoire suggests that advocacy should not involve direction giving or imply control (hierarchical, cultural, or otherwise) on the part of the advocates. It suggests that sustainability advocates should strive to be receptive to others, and it suggest that resistance is likely if advocates fail to listen or "start where people are at." Statements approximating persuasion should be more like cheerleading, proposing, or facilitating than convincing, imploring, cajoling, or insisting.

Two other repertoires provide patterns for talking about desirable forms and connotations of advocacy for participants in this study. The first of these revolves around the notion of “leading by example;” I call it the expressive repertoire. The second one, which I have named the representative repertoire, revolves around claims that advocacy should amount to “sharing data and giving information.”

The Expressive Repertoire: “Leading by Example”

The *expressive repertoire* is the second advocacy-related IR employed by participants in this study. *Personalization or individualization of persuasive communication* is what distinguishes claims in this repertoire. More specifically, this IR promotes organizational advocacy as an expression of personality or individual character—as opposed to, say, an organizational strategy or the exercise of administrative authority. As I compared interview transcripts and my ethnographic field notes, I noticed that this repertoire is frequently associated with attributions about *leadership* and how people *ought to be*. For example, I often heard statements somewhat like, “She/he *is a* real leader on sustainability in her/his department.” An instance of advocacy described in terms of “being” documented in my field notes is this statement: “We have to *be* patient and flexible with them; changes will have to be incremental.”

The data in this section show several patterns in lay theorization of advocacy from the expressive repertoire. First, this study’s participants pair claims from the directive repertoire with claims from the expressive repertoire in order to emphasize differences between the two. Second, with that contrast established, participants used the expressive repertoire to characterize successful or desirable advocacy *in terms of individuals’ emotions, dispositions, motivations, or unique interpersonal communication*

styles. Third, participants treat expressive advocacy as a more concrete, tangible, or action-oriented form of advocacy than others. (This pattern calls to mind the colloquialisms “don’t just talk, do something” and “talk is cheap.”) Fourth, participants imply that individuals’ personal demeanor or character affects the production of “sustainable” organizational communication climates. Finally, I close my discussion of the expressive repertoire with examples of participants’ preference for face-to-face communication when it comes to advocacy.

Contrasting the expressive and directive repertoires. Participants frequently employ the directive repertoire when invoking the expressive repertoire. This move does two things. First, it emphasizes the *individualization* at work in the expressive repertoire. Second, it plays down the other-directedness of advocacy-related communication. Recall that the administrator who served for a time as Interim Director told me:

It’s somewhat difficult for certain people to buy into that because there are people who want to lead and, you know, get puffed up by knowing that everybody’s doing it their way. And there are some people who don’t want to make decisions and want to be told what direction to go. Both of those types of people will be a little bit frustrated at times with the approach that we’ve been taking, but I’m [okay with that].

This description is in keeping with the directive repertoire. I asked him to describe the approach more specifically, given that it wasn’t “puffed up” leadership or telling others “what direction to go.” He explained:

Raising awareness of the possibilities. Not necessarily ever saying, “Do it this way.” Once they start to say, “Do it this way,” I think they’ve, they will start to lose their effectiveness to be that catalyst for a much larger population. [...] You know, you can in your zeal to communicate what you see as best practices can easily come across as an advocate of saying, “You should do it this way.” I think you just have to be careful on that. And I think that, as we select leaders in [the OS Director] position, we have to try to find *people who don’t have any specific agendas but have a passion for seeing this make progress*. And that’s, I think, one of the reasons we’ve been so successful: we’ve had leaders [... that have said]

“We don’t have any one area that we really say has to be done this direction.” We’re really just saying that sustainability’s a broad topic and there’s lots of things that must be considered, and we want lots of people engaged in finding those solutions and coming to those implementations themselves. (My emphasis)

This interviewee’s ideal Office advocate is open-minded and passionate. Such a person’s broad thinking and nonpartisanship keeps them from being a *zealot*, apparently, and that person’s commitment is to an abstract conception of “progress.”

A different interviewee, a man who oversees the OS, also voiced this perspective. Pay attention to the way in which the communicative actions of the Office are described abstractly and then compared to the individuals’ ethical/emotional experience of a “conscience.” Also note the distinction he draws between being “the conscience of the university” and “[telling people] how they should run their own business”:

There isn’t a magic silver bullet at any of these levels, let alone all of them, that makes it all better by shooting it or by using it. So, because of that, what they do [at the OS] is somewhat nebulous, is hard to define. But, if anything, you may want to call it a conscience. Maybe they’re the conscience of the university and just kind of bring that issue to the forefront you know as you contemplate how you conduct your business you know and forget about this and have you thought about this issue or whatever. But I sense that if they were going to attempt to advise or get in the operational minutia, one they probably would not do it as well and two they’d probably piss off the people that they’re trying to tell how they should run their own business by you telling them how to run their own business.

Advocacy, in his terms, is *being and having* an environmental conscience. This is accomplished—in part, at least—by “just kind of [bringing] that issue [i.e., sustainability] to the forefront.” Again, actual communication practices are left abstract and, at the same time, reduced or compared to individual qualities. The same interviewee did identify *necessary qualities of sustainability advocates*. When talking about labels for the various communicative responsibilities of the Office, he said, “Advocating is an interesting one because there has to be some head cheerleader out there who’s beating the drum, at least

at this point in time.” The cheerleader, of course, exudes pep, optimism, and group commitment, goading others along by being “out there [...] beating the drum.”

The broad claim that typifies the expressive repertoire might be stated this way: rather than giving direction, sustainability advocates should lead by example, which means implementing sustainable practices in their own life first, exuding desirable character traits, and understanding others’ limitations. It is important to emphasize the degree to which the expressive repertoire focuses on the character of the advocate. This is a kind of essentialism or reductionism, the degree of which can vary from claim to claim.

Characteristics of the expressive repertoire. Statements characteristic of the expressive repertoire *individualize or personify* advocacy. This repertoire highlights advocates’ *motivations, emotional virtues, and “tangible” or “concrete” actions.*

Let us turn first to the matter of motivation. Motives are usually invoked to stress that people serving the cause of sustainability should have *a sense of purpose*. Yasmine Meadows, a student heavily involved in the Office of Sustainability’s founding, told me this during an interview:

Advocacy carries with it a sense of intention and of already having a concept of what it is we’re trying to achieve. You know, we are advocates for social justice. We are advocates for ecologically generative systems. We are advocates for healthier and more sustainable communities. [...] We do have a goal; we do have a mission. We aren’t dilly dallying or wavering and saying, “Well we could go here and we could go there.” [...] There is that intention, there’s a motive.

Notice that Meadows does not describe strategies or techniques of advocacy. In fact, she does not mention communicative acts. She does mention some topics and objectives of advocacy in the form of ideographs (i.e., “social justice,” “ecologically generative systems,” and healthier [...] communities”). What she stresses most is *the expression of the advocate’s sense of purpose*—their “intention,” “mission,” or “motive.”

One way expressive advocacy is *practiced* at IWU is by publicly engaging in pro-environmental activities (or publicly recounting such activities), especially if they involve some kind of sacrifice or extraordinary effort. People collect and give away reusable canvas shopping bags; they spontaneously bring food to share and announce that key ingredients were grown in their garden or bought from a local vendor; they playfully chide one another for driving alone to a venue accessible by public transit. An example of the importance of this comes from a discussion prior to Lillian Valmer's leaving the Office in the summer of 2008. The OS staff members and I talked about what they hoped for in their replacement hire. My notes on the occasion do not tell me who first said this, but one of us explained that she/he desired "someone who takes sustainability seriously in their own life." Others agreed and, when I asked what this meant, they described a host of specific *behaviors or actions*. These include recycling, commuting to work by means other than a personal automobile, and being involved in civic events and organizations. The selected candidate was to be someone who "doesn't just put sustainability away when they go home" after work.

At work, this sort of action-orientation is key. People *do advocacy* by taking or providing practical steps for others, according to participants. A student partnered with the OS told me that sustainability advocacy involves managing uncertainty:

A lot of it really depends on the person that you have to talk to. I think that it's very important to assess your audience and determine what is going to be the most successful means for accomplishing my goal. And for some who can waffle easily, or don't really have any direction, or don't care, it's going, "Hey I've got an idea for you. Here, did it all. All the work's done. Just do it." And for others you have to like [Russell Snyder] did: you have to lead them to it so that they think it was their idea all along. Unfortunately there's not one way to accomplish this, but I think that the Office has been successful thus far because whether or not they know it, they grasp that.

The overarching label given for such action is *leading by example*. Leading by example is simultaneously an expression of personal commitment and grounded in action/behavior.

This fusion typifies advocacy in the expressive repertoire.

Another good example comes from my ethnographic notes and recordings in late January 2009. That winter, three members of the Office staff and I had a long conversation, part of which everyone in attendance allowed me to audio record. At one point, Robin Carson recalled the President's comments during the ceremony at which he signed IWU onto the American University and College Presidents Climate Commitment:

It was a really telling moment. It was very perceptive of the president, and I think the problem is we haven't gone much further. But, he said he felt like the students were out there leading [the push for an Office of Sustainability] and running down, and he was running behind them, going, "*Wait, wait!* Wait for me; I'm your leader!" [Carson chuckles.] And so far, he's been starting to integrate this more broadly into, when you go to any meeting he's at in any public forum, he talks about sustainability [...] But this *internal driver* [...] you know, *really* directing his top-level administrators to move aggressively is the piece that we're not really sure on." (Interviewee's emphasis)

Then, speaking about IWU's faculty and staff, Carson asked us, "What can they do?"

Karen Adams responded:

[...] Maybe it's just that they're comfortable on an individual departmental level or a very small office level. Maybe they're [moving] some sort of tangible thing forward. Maybe they aren't comfortable being a voice, you know, directly to the President. But maybe they are. But, regardless of your risk level, you can still take tangible actions, instead of just talking about it. There's something for everyone to do.

For those not "comfortable being a *voice*," the alternative is taking "tangible *action*."

This is the sort of advocacy conjured up from the expressive repertoire. Carson's recollection of the President's remarks is also telling: The students were leaders inasmuch as they were moving along rapidly and with intention. The President did, indeed, retell his ironic joke—"Wait, I'm your leader!"—a number of times. The takeaway message, if

you will, was always that the President admired the students' entrepreneurial spirit, measurable achievements, and tenacity.

Let me provide several other examples that clearly demonstrate this joining of emotion/motivation and tangible action in the expressive repertoire. Notice what this graduate student volunteer says compels sustainability advocates, as well as the risks she associates with expressive advocacy:

But [you have to] have some type of motivation internally. It was really hard for me to not to drive my car when it would save me, like, one hour every day because I was just not seeing motivation other than just leading by example, but I'm not leading anyone. Like nobody cares.

The *internal motivation* of the advocate is key because, as this interviewee went on to explain, the advocate must demonstrate consistency in order to be a model for others. Being a model for others is providing a kind of "education," she said. It also means demonstrating the *practicality* of sustainable behavior. She told me that "if people don't see other people doing [some particular behavior ... it won't seem] possible to do and practical." She conceded that structural changes or other incentives would be necessary to compel many people to change. Nevertheless, an important component of the advocacy she described was the resoluteness and personal dedication of the advocate. As another example, a member of the PSAB described advocacy as a component of the larger concept of leadership. When I asked the interviewee to imagine that he was giving advice to the OS Director about leadership through advocacy, he said: "The words I would use are to be bold, to be courageous, to extend the office in terms of advocacy. [...] Let other people be the governor on the engine that says you're revving too fast. I think it's not a time for timidity. It's absolutely not." In this statement, the intentions and actions others' mentioned are given a distinctly emotional and personified character. The emotional

quality of those who lead by example (and by other means) is crucial to claims in the expressive repertoire.

Thus, in the expressive repertoire, claims about advocacy associate it with personal dispositions and emotions, as well as individuals' actions. In this way, advocacy comes to be *the expression of some genuine quality of the advocate*. Of course, participants in this study are not merely treating advocacy as some sort of simple self-representation. Their comments about expressive advocacy's *connection to the larger organizational communication climate* clarify why this repertoire is, in fact, relevant to persuasive communication.

Connection to communication climate. In the expressive repertoire, “good” advocacy is linked to its effect on communication climate. Organizational communication scholars have treated communication climates as “constituted by ensembles of expectations and beliefs about communication” (Poole & McPhee, 1983, p. 213). Though ensembles, communication *climates* are assessed in order to “try to capture the totality of life within an organization [... which is] important because [...communication climates are] *the conditions for communication* in the daily workings of an organization” (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2011, pp. 95-96; my emphasis). The implicit claim suffusing the expressive repertoire is that “leading by example” either (1) plays to the conventions of the organization’s communication climate or (2) establishes communication norms that ought to apply to “sustainable organizations.”

I interviewed one student who had partnered with the OS on several projects. She explained that her involvement with the Office enabled her to become a leader on

campus, especially among other students. Indeed, this person launched an annual waste-reduction event, held sustainability-related administrative roles in student government, and more. When I asked the student how her partnership with the OS enabled her advocacy, she was clear:

With students, what was really unique about the Office is that they were approachable. You should write that down. They weren't some scary place. There's an intimidation factor walking into a lot of places on campus because, to them, you're just a student. So, the Office being so approachable and accepting and willing to work with you and to give you more—more worth, even though you're just some undergraduate student—that was huge.

A member of the PSAB also connected cited a personable and welcoming communication as central to the Office's sustainability advocacy. What's more, the PSAB member, like the student leader, stressed communication climate's affect on work with students. This person advised OS staff members to

create an openness and receptiveness to initiatives. And communicate to people that we can get things done in a hurry, because the lifetime of a student on campus is 4 years, 5 years, 6 years maximum for an undergraduate. On average, it's 6 years, but many of the students that are involved in these kinds of initiatives are overachievers and will be in and out in 4 years.

In the above quotation, an open and receptive communication climate is said to have practical value. Specifically, it's utility helps “get things done in a hurry” and in concert with a transient and sometimes overachieving population. For the PSAB member quoted here, advocacy is one of several forms of leadership communication.

Another member of the PSAB discussed advocacy as a component of leadership, too. This board member's focus was the Office's relationships with various operational units around campus, and he concentrated on *challenging and questioning* as acts of advocacy. Still, pay attention to the fact that this interviewee stresses that the OS must

first “find organizations who want to work with you” in order to avoid getting “a black eye on campus.” He stated:

Within [the category of] “leading,” I think there’s certain things that you have to do. You have to advocate, you have to challenge, you have to persuade, you have to question. [...] I would expect that part of the leadership role of the Office of Sustainability would be to challenge and question what we’re doing. Really their role is to go out and find—and I’m not saying that they ought to go to every office and question and challenge every office, because I think that would give them a black eye on campus. But I think what you do is have organizations who want to work with you, and *then* you challenge and question them on what they’re doing. That’s part of them asking you in: they know you’re going to challenge, and you’re going to question them, and you’re going to give them [feedback], because there’s things in our office that we don’t know that we could do that would even be sustainable. And so I think we ought to be *inviting* them in to look at stuff and that’s part of, as we, as we work with the Office of Sustainability you know we’ve asked them, “What are some things that we can do?” And, “Are there things that would help us?”(My emphasis)

This interviewee’s assertions call to mind Foss and Griffin’s (1995) concept of *invitational rhetoric*: “an invitation to understanding as a means to create a relationship rooted in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” (p. 5). The interviewee stresses that advocacy and challenges follow “them asking you in.” Though the interviewee mentions persuasion, he makes clear that the leadership/advocacy of the OS is mutual and cooperative, involving the kind of approachability and openness other interviewees referenced. For example, the same interviewee, responsible for some financial operations at IWU, later told me that he would be skeptical of possible but financially taxing sustainability initiatives, though “we could maybe agree with [the OS] that we’d like to do that, and they can help us push that along.” The interviewee’s reference to agreements, invitations, and searches for willing partners suggest advocacy *on certain terms or in a certain climate*, even as he says that “you have to advocate [...and] persuade.”

Indeed, claims from the expressive repertoire usually connote the *civility* and climate of nonpersuasion, so to speak, promoted by invitational rhetoric scholars (see Bone, Griffin, & Scholz, 2008). Thus, expressive advocacy may be seen as a particular kind of personal display or personification of organization. The expressive repertoire employed by participants in this study values enthusiasm, perseverance, internal motivation without a particular political agenda, openness and deference to others, and the maintenance of an accessible and low-pressure organizational climate.

Preference for communication in person. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that participants in this study routinely said that they preferred communicating in person. (Preferred, that is, more than technologically mediated communication or communicating formally as the voice of “the organization” rather than as an individual. Most often, participants promote this mode of communication for *continuing relationships beyond initial attempts at advocacy*. Take this statement by a recently hired Office employee, for example:

[...] being personable, and friendly, and good communicators is really important. That’s one of the most important things we can do, like if I meet with somebody and they want to talk to me again because, you know, *I dropped the seed*. I’m like, “Oh hey, this other school is doing this really cool lab project.” And then they call me the next day to get more information about it. In a perfect world, that’s because of the friendly dialogue. If I had said, “You guys should be doing this; it’s a really big bummer you guys aren’t,” they wouldn’t call me again. They’d be like, “That woman’s crazy.” [...] I think that’s a huge part of it. [...] I can shut down if I have a meeting with somebody and they’re either negative, or just not very open, or don’t smile—just, yeah, that emotional connection. And I’ll be like, “I don’t want really want to work with them.” So what’s the point? [If people think of our Office,] “Well, those people are not very nice,” no one’s going to be on board. So, *seeing us, meeting us, liking us, and wanting to have that connection*, I think, is really a key factor to how our Office communicates. (My emphasis)

Notice how much of her statement could refer to communication that is not face-to-face. Nevertheless, the interviewee went out of her way to clarify that “a key factor” to advocacy that “[drops] the seed” is communicating in person.

A different interviewee, an IWU staff member who volunteered his time on the SC, made a similar claim:

I think of the key element was the personal communication. It's not just “create a pamphlet and distribute a pamphlet.” For the anti-idling campaign [i.e., a campaign against unnecessary running of automobile engines when parked on campus], it was having people there. “Here's a pamphlet, but let me talk to you about what we're doing. What do you think? And here's our ideas.” I think that personal communication is still a very key piece. [...] I always like personal communication, face-to-face communication. [...] I think what doesn't work is somebody spewing out information and dictating what other people should do, or just spewing out information without that personal contact. I think face-to-face communication is essential. So, they [at the OS] need to maintain that with all the key players. [...] One-on-one communication: you can't beat it, you know? [...] It needs to be personalized somehow.

On this point, I simply asked him, “Because?” He responded: “Because if you don't have that personal touch you're not going to get the cooperation and you're going to stop getting all the input that you were [going to otherwise]. I think, in order to get new ideas and new input, you need to maintain that personal relationship.”

The preference for the human contact and mutual understanding is persistent and demonstrated in these examples (cf. Peters, 1999). We might treat the kind of communication described by these interviewees—its utility, quality, and apparent authenticity—as an idealization of the kind of advocacy promoted by the expressive repertoire.

Summary. Repeatedly, participants in this study associate advocacy that “tells people what to do” with brief, unsuccessful interactions. Positively characterized advocacy, by contrast, is accomplished through “leadership by example,” passion or

courageousness, the maintenance of a harmonious and inviting communication climate, and communication conducted in person. These are the themes that hold together the expressive repertoire of advocacy evident in this case.

The Representative Repertoire: “Sharing Data and Information”

A third IR drawn upon by this study’s participants as they made claims about advocacy is *the representative repertoire*. This repertoire, like the others, is organized around what language is presumed to do. The employment of this IR is associated with the two chief images used to characterize the Office.⁵ From the beginning, the OS was called both a pan-campus advocate for sustainability *and* “a clearinghouse for [sustainability-related] information.” The representative repertoire includes discourse that creatively fuses those two images of the organization. The representative repertoire is related to popular axioms such as “it speaks for itself,” “those are the facts,” and “just the facts, please.” Searle (1975) has discussed representation as a speech act that people “can literally characterize [...] (inter alia) as true or false” (Searle, 1975, p. 355). Representation is the description of the world as it (supposedly) was, is, or will be. This ideal is the essential characteristic of the representative repertoire.

The representative repertoire *deemphasizes* advocacy’s associations with individual beliefs, vested interests, and change-orientation. It *emphasizes* supposedly neutral, objective, or disinterested features of the situation, such as facts, data, and information. The central claim of this repertoire is that *advocates’ primary motive* should be understood as *description of the facts of the matter*. If nothing else, participants’ claimed that *representation of truth* ought to be associated with sustainability “advocacy” more fundamentally—or, perhaps, to a greater degree—than

the taking of positions. Thus, claims about advocacy that constitute this repertoire serve to/attempt to (1) neutralize advocacy and (2) naturalize the (un)sustainability the situation addressed by advocates.

Characteristics of the representative repertoire. All of the people I interviewed said that the OS should serve to provide the “best” information available, and to do so with as little possible “manipulation” or “shading.” Such expressions are not uncommon in organizations, of course. Rhetorically, those expressions align the advocate with the pursuit of the unadulterated truth. Concern for truthfulness was heightened for OS staff by the fact that they were charged with managing data that had never before been collected or organized. A supervisor to which the OS director reports told me that he persuades by “[preparing] whatever logical argument they [the target of persuasion] might be interested in or understand.” While it is difficult to get “dinosaur thinkers” to “see the light,” he also faces a significant challenge in the kind and quality of data available:

I [...] attempt to use data. And that’s, in my mind, *always* the best thing to defer to. The challenge that we have, at least for the types of things that I’m trying to forward—those arguments with respect to utilization, economies of scale, better logic, [...] better savings, etcetera—is doing it in an environment where we have, not shoddy data, but data that hasn’t really, uh, been collected in ways that we can use in a very reliable fashion. I mean it’s *broad*. (Interviewee’s emphasis)

How many air miles do IWU faculty, staff, and administrators travel per annum? What are the average levels of natural gas use per building in any given season? What are the likely outcomes for natural resource use and fiscal coffers if all new buildings are required to meet specific design standards? Because much of that data had never before been sought, and because the data were associated with the neologism “sustainability,” OS staff members regularly communicated in ways that suggested the management of

such data typified “advocacy.” As the supervisor quoted above told me, the OS is “maturing” in that “I think getting to the point where we can have better systems in place to measure and monitor and analyze. That helps us as we continue forward in advising whomever—decision makers, leadership, etc.” The following interview extracts further demonstrate the ways in which OS staff and partners draw upon the representative repertoire.

The chief implication of the representative repertoire is that *the role of the OS is to provide the data against which all claims and arguments are measured*. Offering an expert, relatively disinterested take on data is either a kind of advocacy in itself or the foundation that makes sustainability advocacy possible. As an example, a PSAB member told me that “tracking” was an important communicative function of the OS on campus. I asked him, “How do you see the balance between presenting information and doing advocacy or persuasion? What’s the relationship between those?” He replied:

In my mind they’re tied together very closely. I think that stems from my disciplinary upbringing as a natural scientist. I firmly believe that, as scientists, we’re responsible for producing data, for running experiments that try to reduce ambiguities in data, etc., and that we’re responsible for putting in, as well as we can, all the observations that we can about a particular system. Then, the next stage is what you want to do with the observations and that is sometimes judged, is *governed*, by people’s views, their religion, their politics and so forth. But I don’t think you should confuse observations with policy actions and so forth that come from it. I would like to *base* actions on data. So presenting data in as clear a form as possible, in as unambiguous form. [...] Let’s start with observations.

The PSAB member expressed his frustration, “as a scientist,” that people are often

misrepresenting data in a way that is unscientific for a particular purpose. So, to come back to your initial question, I’m a firm believer that once you get all of the information out in as clear a form as possible, then let people go from there. Now, I’m also *very* cognizant, in fact, that if you put all of the data on the table, people will make very different interpretations of it. [...] The data are data. They’re observations. What is in conflict is actions that people might want to take. (Interviewee’s emphasis)

These extracts touch on a refrain I heard regularly in my time participating in and observing the work of the Office. People don't "see" the harm sustained by local and global ecologies. Students, members of the community, and so forth were regularly described as in need of "education" because they "didn't have the facts." While the great majority of people were characterized as merely ignorant of the implications of the accumulating data on IWU and its relation to the environment, some were said to willfully disregard evidence of it. The political interests of those in power, especially representatives in state and national governments, sustain their ignorance of the "facts" and disregard for "the science." During the Office's first year, staff members and I frequently talked about their efforts as "laying the groundwork," "setting the record straight," and "getting the facts right" on sustainability. This sometimes involved explaining scientists' overwhelming agreement that anthropogenic climate change is real and presents a number of urgent threats to humanity, for example. On many occasions, the staff and I would grouse after a long day, a meeting with a reluctant campus administrator, or another disappointing state legislative session, that "they don't get it." In one of these instances in November 2010, Karen Adams asked no one in particular, "What do they have to lose?" Why is it that so many people are unwilling to "hear the basic facts" about sustainability?

The following response nicely captures the sense that representation is the foundation or at the core of the Office's advocacy. To clarify an interviewee's statement, I asked him: "So, designing systems to gather and deploy data is part and parcel of the persuasion process for you [...]?" He replied:

Definitely. [...] I mean, that's critical. That's so important. Without that—if, in fact, we were going to attempt to forward any of these appropriate elements [or] strategies that support sustainable development—it all just becomes a debate on subjective measurements or debate on my opinion of what is going on in the world versus your opinion.

In this statement, the OS is cast as an advocate in that it does not allow sustainability-related communication at IWU *to become merely a subjective debate*.

A second claim characteristic of the representative repertoire defines advocacy as broad interpretation of data. Here, *the advocate acts as an expert of sorts, but one that maintains some distance from specific issues*. The most obvious examples include drawing attention to underappreciated data and identifying absences in data. For instance, one interviewee told me that the OS should be advocating “to some degree.” I asked him to explain what he meant.

Well, we talked about [how] there are things that as the institution may be ignoring. [...] Then, they [the OS] can be somewhat of an advocate to say, “We’ve got to come up with the solutions in this area. We’ve got to define that.” But when it comes to championing a particular cause, which can also mean being an advocate for a cause, I would say no.

Another interviewee, a member of the PSAB, pointed out to me that,

Actually, the climate plan [required by a compact signed by the president of IWU] barely requires that we do anything because we don't have to be climate neutral until 2050 and anything we do today won't actually help us achieve that in 2050. But the obvious next step is clear. We should be reducing our emissions as soon as possible. So, clearly, that requires advocating to some groups. But it's a very *soft form of advocacy*, you see? The university's president has signed this commitment. I mean, how much are you advocating there and how much are you just sort of sharing the information that, actually, your job description is to cut emissions. So, I think there's ways in which you can do that. (My emphasis)

This “soft form of advocacy” relies primarily upon the “sharing of information” about what is the case. As further evidence of the preference for distancing advocacy from the

position-taking, consider this OS employee's reaction to my use of the word advocacy in a question:

I guess I obviously have a negative connotation for that. I think we should do more, instead of advocating, more showing what sustainability is. So, the things that we do show that sustainability's not just energy savings, but it's local foods [for example]. It's advocating for [sustainability] because it gets more people involved with that aspect of sustainability, but we're not having to say, "Look at sustainability. It's all these things. You should donate, and vote for us, and things like that." It's more of like, "We're showing you what it is. If you think that's cool, you should be on board."

The sort of advocacy she prefers involves *just the facts, please*, as the saying goes. Such representation constitutes advocacy due to the *status of the data*: People may not be aware of the it, it is underappreciated, or it represents an alternative picture of the situation facing IWU. In some cases, information about sustainability is trusted to be sufficiently engaging for others to "get on board."

Usually, claims in the representative repertoire involve a very abstract conceptualization of the way in which certain data provide an alternative conceptualization of IWU or sustainability. I asked a member of the PSAB—who has also served as a faculty member and IWU administrator, and whom I quoted earlier about the "misuse" of science—"Is it the role of the Office to advocate for certain values or [...] preferences?" His response to that question is provided below. I want to emphasize the way in which the interviewee ties "value" to the recognition and treatment of certain kinds of data. Earlier in our conversation, he pointed out that people "have values" and that "the data are data." Below, he characterizes the OS's advocacy as the "bridging" of data and values. The interviewee minimizes the place of support for particular positions or policies in his description of doing advocacy—for example, when he characterizes sustainability advocacy abstractly in the statement below as "looking

out for the long term.” I am *not* claiming that he divests advocacy of any meaning tied to values or influence. Rather, I wish to point out the way in which his talk strongly couples the idea of advocacy with two things: acts of representation and what we might call the virtue of representative fidelity. His reply:

Yes. I’ve talked earlier about the importance of taking a broader view and a longer term view. I have this little imaginary graph that I create in some of my classes, I call it the space-time disconnect. On one axis, it’s just a generalized space axis going from local to global. And the other axis, its a time axis going from the immediate time through the day, the month, the year, the decade, the century, the millennium. And I ask people to put a dot on that graph every time they have a thought. So, “Where am I going to have lunch today?” That’s on the campus and in the next hour. So that’s a point. [...] “Am I going to watch the [basketball] game tonight?” That’s another dot. And so forth. And it turns out that we fill the axis with the bottom corner of this graph, which is, in other terms, the here-and-now, right? Here in place, now in time. But if, in fact, you think about the issues that are related to sustainability—whether they’re human population, whether they’re water, or they’re species, the extinction of species, etcetera—they are in the upper-right hand corner of this graph. They’re large in space and long in time. So, it’s a responsibility of somebody to say, “We have to bridge this disconnect,” and I think the Office of Sustainability is directly charged with saying to many people, “We advocate a value system that is looking out for long term and large space.”

These sorts of advocacy—which OS staff members called “soft,” “subtle,” or “educational” during my time doing ethnographic fieldwork—are rooted in participants’ meanings for and reliance on assumptions about data and information.

Advice giving as an ideal type of representative advocacy. When Office employees and partners used the representative repertoire to discuss *specific* arguments and propositions, they frequently employed the word *advice*. The Office “gives advice.” They do so after figuring out how to “get to the table.” Once at the table, Office representatives are there to give advice by representing or providing a “sustainability perspective.” Participants recounted this sequence again and again during my ethnographic fieldwork. In the following example, a very active volunteer and member of

the PSAB draws from the representative repertoire, but foregrounds persuasion to a greater degree than most of my other interviewees. This excerpt demonstrates the way in which participants' talk about advice giving borrows from the representative repertoire but also allows for more directly persuasive communication.

You know, it seems to me that [...] the Office of Sustainability is specifically charged with something. I can [...] explain] it in the way that I define the Office of Space Planning and Management. Our charge is to account for every space on campus, and then advise the administration on the best utilization of that space with the resources we have and the challenges we meet. My charge is very clear. My charge is to bring to the administration the best information I have about space and all its concepts. And I can create a lot of concepts around space. Because there's a lot of different things that nobody else is really looking at, because they don't have the breadth of what we do and [they don't see those interactions] the way we see those interactions. The Office of Sustainability, to me, is exactly the same thing. All of the offices are exactly the same thing! And the Office of Sustainability has a specific charge. They are supposed to be telling us about sustainability, what's possible, what we need to do, what we need to think about, how we might go about it, what are our opportunities, what are our impediments. That's their job. And so, you persuade using whatever tools are necessary to persuade. You are part of the dialogue. You have a conversation. You have a debate. You come up with whatever facts there are, and if you get rejected or you only get partially accepted, then you figure out how to keep on moving forward. I mean, it's the way it works.

The same individual also told me that, at the time of the interview, the advocacy role of the Office and its partners should serve a particular position or interest. Pay attention to the fact that, while this interviewee speaks of "forcing" action, he grounds that action in "defining" the situation. Put another way, this kind of advocacy deals with the relative truth or falsity of different ways of conceptualizing sustainability at IWU:

I think it's time and that we present to the administration the clearest definition of what we think the challenges are. In the course of doing that, we can decide exactly where we stand on carbon accumulation and impact, and all that kind of stuff, but we need to declare that this is what we think the problem is and how significant we think the problem is. And we need to force the administration to publicly make a decision.

In this statement, the interviewee draws simultaneously from the directive and representative repertoires. His fusion revolves around characterizing advocacy as a kind of expertise or provision of advice. While the OS's advocacy aims at inducing action—i.e., administrators publicly making decisions—that advocacy is couched in the language of the representative repertoire—i.e., descriptions of what the situation *is* and *is not*.

Contrast that with another interviewee's remarks about advice giving. This person employs the language of the representative repertoire, but not the directive repertoire. He suggested that an important role of Office employees is providing “credible evaluation.”

In fact, he seeks to downplay connotations of advice giving as

[reinforcing] a position that you're taking, or want to take, [in order] to have an output that is different than it would have been had you just used the data in its raw form. So, I try to stay away from that. But, again, my desire is to have this consistent way of [...] interpreting and analyzing. Ways that're reasonable, logical, and credible.

This is the tension at the heart of the representative repertoire. Participants use the representative repertoire to associate advocacy with reason, logic, science, and other culturally celebrated ideals. At the same time, they grapple with the meaning of *communicating* data and information in the interest of sustainability in a way that does not appear to have the qualities of directive advocacy.

Summary. The representative repertoire enables participants to align advocacy with truth telling. Importantly, the language of the representative repertoire usually downplays the role of *the advocate*, the person(s) engaged in persuasion. Data and information are keywords in the repertoire; neutrality and disinterested expertise are its guiding values.

The expressive repertoire, by contrast, elevates individuals' personal connection to advocacy. In fact, the language of the expressive repertoire largely reduces advocacy to genuine self-expression. Leadership and modeling are keywords in the expressive repertoire, especially when associated with the phrases *leading by example* or *modeling behavior*. Authenticity, genuineness, openness, perseverance and action-orientation are this repertoire's guiding values. These values are frequently discussed as *virtues* of particular people.

Finally, The directive repertoire offers patterns for describing what sustainability advocacy should not be at IWU. Telling and forcing are this repertoire's keywords. Participants regularly contrast *telling people what to do* with inviting others or being invited into conversation, being open, and letting people think something "was their idea in the first place." Key values involved in this repertoire are indirectness, patience, and adaptability.

Discussion and Conclusion

Above, I explored three IRs used by staff and partners of the OS to make claims about advocacy. Looking across the three, we can make at least two observations. First, participants *minimize or disparage* overtly persuasive communication in their lay theories of advocacy. They tend to promote advocacy as expression or representation, and denigrate its connotations of direction and persuasion. Participants favor the term advocacy rather than *persuasion* and, similarly, they use the directive repertoire to theorize what advocacy should *not* be at IWU. By contrast, participants use the expressive and representative repertoires to theorize successful or favorable advocacy in this case.

Second, the participants' lay theorization of advocacy possesses what we might call a realist tone. Let us define realism as the depiction of things "as they are." Thus, a realist style favors (the appearance that we are) presenting the world as it is. Recall how the interviewees repeated that giving directions or telling people what to do are ineffective or unethical advocacy strategies. Instead of using rhetoric to actively and openly persuade others, participants told me that the Office should lead by example and show the data. Yes, most of the interviewees told me that "knowing your audience" is "key" to successful sustainability advocacy. Still, participants usually talked about strategic adaptation to audiences in terms of *what part of reality* they should discuss with others (i.e., in a realist tone). For example, leadership by example was frequently talked about as an expression of some *authentic self* or a demonstration of *intrinsic motivations* (cf. Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Realist style is even clearer in claims associated with the representative repertoire. Within that repertoire, advocacy is spoken of most highly when it is the simple portrayal of compelling facts. In any case, staff members and partners of the OS most often talk about advocacy as a compelling depiction or representation of the world rather than the symbolic creation or change of it. Importantly, this is the case despite the fact that OS staff and partners seek organizational and environmental change.

As a whole, my analysis demonstrates the systematic way in which these lay theories of advocacy downplay/denigrate the role of influence and persuasion in participants' communication with other members of IWU. When influence and persuasion are acknowledged, participants' tend to insist that other members of IWU (1) voluntarily enter the rhetorical situation, (2) determine what sort of *interorganizational*

or *interoffice* relationship they want to be in, and (3) set the boundaries for persuasion and change.

These patterns limit the participants' ability to reflect critically on *communication's* role in advocacy. That is, the preferences and patterns exhibited by the three IRs I described in this chapter treat advocates as people who simply *exude* leadership or *convey* facts. The lay theorizing I have described says little about symbols, interaction, and communication that establishes ongoing and influential relationships. Office employees and volunteers have identified advocacy as one function and *raison d'être* of the Office of Sustainability. The patterns in theorizing advocacy that I have described may inhibit IWU sustainability advocates' ability to create coherent communication strategies, as well as their ability to account for communication successes and failures to date.

While participants in this study proudly proclaim "change" as their goal, they declaim broad types of communication used to realize change. I believe that lay theories of advocacy more embracing of the art of rhetoric might serve the participants in this study well. Such a shift could help this group of sustainability advocates speak in coherent, forthright, and compelling ways about *their own role* in advocacy for sustainability-related change at IWU.

Notes

¹ I want to be clear about my use of the terms persuasion and advocacy in the remainder of this chapter. When I discuss advocacy, I will reference its emic meanings. To put their struggle over the meanings of advocacy in perspective, I will sometimes talk about advocacy as a variety of *persuasive communication*. When I reference *persuasion* in this way, I am referring to the term's etic meanings—that is, its meaning in communication scholarship. Yes, participants frequently used “persuasion” as a kind of dirty word. That is significant and will bear upon my analysis. When they talk about advocacy, this study's participants are still talking about the practical art of communication to influence people, shape knowledge, or affect change—about rhetoric and persuasion, in the terms of various communication scholars. I will not use quotation marks when I am discussing the etic, scholarly meaning or category of persuasive communication. When I am referring to the emic, site-specific meanings given to “persuasion,” I will bracket the term with quotation marks.

² The “triple bottom line” is a popular concept in management and business literatures dealing with social responsibility. A recent book intended for a broad audience and focused on the matter of organizational sustainability says, “The Triple Bottom Line exists currently as a kind of balanced scorecard that captures in numbers and words the degree to which any company is or is not creating value for its shareholders and for society” regarding economic, environmental, and social matters (Savits & Weber, 2006, p. xiii).

³ The statements in quotation marks in this paragraph are not quotations. Instead, they are statements I've invented to represent similar claims often repeated in the research scene. They should be read as characterizations or impressions of routine talk from and amongst OS employees. In the rest of this chapter, statements bracketed by quotation marks are actual quotations of participants unless otherwise noted.

⁴ The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System is “an internationally recognized green building certification system, providing third-party verification that a building or community was designed and built using strategies aimed at improving performance across [...] metrics” (U.S. Green, 2010, para. 1). The U.S. Green Building Council, a nonprofit organization, administers the program. Many organizations and governments now require that their buildings be built to earn a particular LEED rating (e.g., a silver-, gold-, or platinum-level rating).

⁵ See Boulding (1956b) for a discussion of images of organization(s) as “what I believe to be true; my subjective knowledge” (p. 6).

CHAPTER 7

VOICE

Introduction

In this chapter, I extend Senecah's (2004) conception of the "trinity of voice" (TOV) in environmental communication in two ways. First, I consider her concept's applicability in organizational settings, especially for sustainability officers working in situations *other* than those governed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Second, I explain the role of *communication dialectics* in the TOV. Senecah says little about the processes that people use to realize access, standing, and influence, which are the elements of the TOV. To account for the dynamic, ongoing, and tension-laden nature of environmental voice organizing, her general theory requires elaboration. In response, I identify three dialectics of voice organizing (DVO), which I derived from my reflection on both Senecah's TOV and my research with the Office of Sustainability (OS) at Intermountain West University (IWU). My effort is analogous to Hatch's (1993) addition of cultural dynamics to existing models of organizational culture. Hatch's work explained the *relationships between* elements of culture previously theorized by Schein (1985). Similarly, my aim in this chapter is to demonstrate the how Senecah's conception of voice can be enhanced to better account for organizing processes and the *cultivation of collective voice*.¹

Senecah (2004) defines voice as the realization of persons' access, standing, and influence in communication situations. I will explore her definition of voice in more

detail below, but I also want to extend her theory to processes of *voice organizing*. I am primarily interested in people's struggle to create collective voice—or, to put a bit differently, to establish a collective's voice. Since I focus more on the work of cobbling together an “organized” voice on environmental issues than the status of individuals according to the TOV, I should provide a definition of voice organizing that goes beyond the trinity of access, standing, and influence. I will borrow from Watts' (2001) definition of voice, in which “its essential [characteristic is] an ethical or emotional occurrence in need of acknowledgement” (p. 192). Communicators “cultivate” voice, Watts says, by making claims upon themselves and others through unique “idioms, vocabularies, and sets of cultural meanings” (p.192). With those treatments of voice in mind, I propose a five part definition of voice organizing: (1) the continuous processes engaged by people (2) using discourse and texts in order to (3) constitute and maintain collective communication patterns (4) with ethical, emotional, or identity-related dimensions (5) related to access, standing, and influence in a variety of situations.²

A recent report published by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE, 2008) showed the potential for an organizing-oriented model of voice in environmental communication situations: for sustainability officers at colleges and universities, “overall sustainability coordination” occupied the greatest percentage of work time (28.7%). My additions to Senecah's theory of voice may help scholars and practitioners of organizational/environmental communication to interpret, create, and evaluate processes of voice organizing in a variety of situations. Understanding and thinking creatively about the persistent tensions

involved in the cultivation of some sense of collective voice may be of value to sustainability officers in a variety of organizational settings.

This chapter has four remaining major sections. First, I review the concept of voice in organization studies. I do this in order to demonstrate why my extension of Senecah's (2004) TOV is relevant to both environmental and organizational communication scholars and practitioners. Second, I describe Senecah's theory of the TOV in detail. I provide examples from my own study and explain why the theoretical perspective I developed in Chapter 4 is relevant to Senecah's work. Third, I introduce three dialectical tensions into Senecah's framework: the dialectics of facilitation, leadership, and motivation. I provide a great number of examples from my interviews and participant observation. Fourth and finally, I close the chapter with a discussion of three different frames for thinking and talking about collective or organized voice.

The Voice Concept in Organization Studies

Scholars in the area of organization studies have addressed the voice concept in several ways. Despite some variation, the *problematics* of voice are a fundamental element of most communication-based studies of organizing:

As organizational communication scholars, we argue that communication is not a neutral process of information transmission; rather, communication is constitutive of organizing and has political consequences that both enable and constrain the possibilities for collective behavior. (Mumby & Stohl, 1996, p. 58)

Who "speaks" in organizational communication and whose interests are represented in organizations' messages are significant problems because "what appears natural and normal about organizational practices is actually socially constructed and obscures other organizational possibilities" (Mumby & Stohl, p. 58). In communication studies, scholars

have developed a host of concepts to account for the fact that voice is always socially negotiated, contingent, and changing. Indeed, voice is a master metaphor for communication, itself (Putnam & Boys, 2006). Still, I am not aware of any attempt to *model* a case of voice organizing dynamics in communication studies.

Organizational communication scholars' treatments of voice owe quite a lot to scholars in other disciplines. Weber's foundational work in sociology stressed the examination of *subjective* experience (see, e.g., Weber, 1946). Good examples come from his trailblazing analyses of bureaucracy (Weber, 1968), which highlighted the struggle over voice in complex organizations. In fact, Clegg and Lounsbury (2009) argue that voice and politics are a *central feature* of Weber's sociology and analyses of complex organizations (see also Barker, 1993). Reed (2009) explains that sociologists such as Selznick (1949) extended Weber's work by, first, studying "the realm of actual behavior" and, second, providing "a leitmotif for subsequent studies of the *dynamics* of bureaucracy and their wider implications" for people's subjective understanding of things (p. 563, my emphasis). In short, Weber helped to establish scholarly concern for the intimate relationship between organizing, organizational development, and voice.

Another landmark conceptualization of voice is Hirschman's (1970) *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, a book that explains stakeholder and member responses to organizational decline and change. Hirschman, an economist, conceived of voice as a "non-market force" or "political mechanism" exercised by people who have a stake in an organization (p. 19). He defined voice as

any attempt at all to change, rather than to escape from, an objectionable state of affairs, whether through individual or collective petition to the management directly in charge, through appeal to a higher authority with the intention of

forcing a change in management, or through various types of actions and protests, including those that are meant to mobilize public opinion. (p. 30)

If people do not respond to organizational decline through the exercise of voice, they may respond through exit, meaning cutting ties with the organization in question, or loyalty, which is a “special attachment to an organization” that moderates the likelihood that a person will exercise their options for exit or voice (p. 77). For Hirschman, voice is unique:

It is a far more ‘messy’ concept because it can be graduated, all the way from faint grumbling to violent protest; it implies articulation of one’s critical opinions rather than a private, ‘secret’ vote in the anonymity of a supermarket; and finally, it is direct and straightforward rather than roundabout. Voice is political action par excellence. (p. 16)

Thus, Hirschman placed voice squarely in the domain of symbolic activity, focusing upon its political nature and consequences. However, Hirschman’s work largely left unanswered questions about how we might interpret and assess particular manifestations of voice.

Cheney’s (1995, 2002) engagement of Bernstein’s (1976, p. 490) “necessary elements for effective worker participation in decision making” was one important response. When evaluating worker voice in organizational processes, Bernstein argued, observers must attend to three dimensions: degree of control exercised, range of issues “addressable” and addressed, and the level at which control is exercised (see Bernstein, pp. 492-494). Working from that generalizable but flexible three-part framework, scholars could systematically assess and critique attempts to organize voice.

Communication is of paramount concern, Cheney argued, because rhetoric and symbolic interaction are the means by which issues are made fair game or off limits, to put it in colloquial terms. Furthermore, rhetoric and symbolic interaction provide the resources for

achieving and maintaining control in organizations. Organization scholars interested in the concept of voice thus draw upon traditions that emphasize its subjective, symbolic, and political character.

In fact, critical work on voice now predominates in the discipline of communication studies. One strain of critical work on organizational voice focuses upon various forms of *silencing* and *suppression*. Concepts frequently employed in communication studies of this sort include discursive closure (e.g., Deetz, 1992), managerialism (e.g., Zoller, 2003), concertive control (e.g., Barker, 1993; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), and bounded emotionality (e.g., Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998; Mumby & Putnam, 1992). A second strain of the critical work on organizational voice deals with attempts to establish “alternative” voices and organizational forms.

Communications scholarship has described situations, dilemmas, and opportunities facing those who organize in order to give voice to those who would speak differently about gender (e.g., Ashcraft, 2004; Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996), race (e.g., Ashcraft & Allen, 2003), class (e.g., Cheney & Cloud, 2006), and such. What is common to both strains of such research on organizational voice is an abiding concern for (1) the maintenance of avenues for meaningful participation and (2) the negotiation of voices’ authenticity and efficacy in situ (Buzzanell, 1994; Clair, 1998; Mumby, & Stohl, 1996).

Other recent scholarship on organizational voice pays specific attention to the complexity of the concept. This literature stresses that voice is not the finalized work of a single “author.” Instead, collective voice evolves in the negotiation of competing demands or the navigation of relational dialectics. For instance, Ganesh, Zoller, and Cheney (2005) call upon organization studies scholars to look beyond “micropolitics”

and investigate problems of collective struggle. Dempsey (2007) offered an exemplary analysis of the challenges of organizing voice. Her study of an international nongovernmental organization developed the concept of bounded voice to explain “a dynamic organizational process in which opportunities for voice are strategically and provisionally limited to particular forums” (p. 312). Dempsey points out that “collective empowerment” does not *necessarily* translate into “increased” stakeholder voice. In fact, organizations may purposefully silence individual members in the pursuit of some sense of collective voice (see also Ashcraft, 2006; Stohl & Cheney, 2001).³ Some have pointed out that we can think of collective voice in terms of *polyphony*, the complex orchestration of a great variety of voices (Hazen, 1993). Thus, the “organizing” of voice involves creativity, negotiation, contestation, and paradox.

In sum, organization studies scholarship has shown “voice” to be a complex, multifaceted accomplishment of individuals and groups. Achieving and organizing voice involves (1) the assertion of identity (i.e., the distinctiveness of who or what is speaking) and (2) expression regarding some (potentially) consequential subject matter. As well, the efficaciousness of a voice is dependent upon its interrelationship with encompassing organizational systems. Most importantly, voice is a dynamic concept. A voice is never settled; it is perpetuated in day-to-day practices rife with confusion, tension, and contradiction.

In the following section, I introduce a theory of voice from environmental communication studies. Fusing environmental and organizational scholarship may provide us with ways to study, model, and promote or critique environmental voice(s) in complex organizations.

A Theory of Voice from Environmental Communication Studies

Senecah (2004) proposed that voice be thought of as a *trinity* of access, standing, and influence. Thinking of voice in terms of this trinity, she argued, could provide a “[useful and] effective benchmark against which to plan or evaluate participatory processes regarding contentious environmental issues” (p. 13). Practical applications of the TOV ought to engender “an ongoing relationship of trust building to enhance community cohesiveness and capacity, [which] results in good environmental decisions” (Senecah, 2004, p. 23). Senecah’s essay dealt primarily with public policy and public debate contexts, especially those subject to the NEPA. Perhaps because her examples came almost exclusively from NEPA public participation processes, Senecah gave minimal attention to the processes and tensions involved in building *collective voices* in environmental decision making. Still, it is useful to conceive of access, standing, and influence as the foundations of meaningful voice on environmental issues. Before expanding on Senecah’s theory, I will briefly discuss each of the components of the trinity.

The Trinity of Voice: Access, Standing, and Influence

Citing Cronen’s (1995) approach to practical theory, Senecah conceives of the three elements of the TOV as “flexible, expanding abilities that cannot be reduced to technique” (p. 21). She is clear that access, standing, and influence are *not* things people possess, nor are they easily quantifiable statuses. Senecah’s general theory of the TOV guides us away from asking questions like, “Do I *have* access, standing, and influence?” and toward questions like, “How might I *exercise* meaningful access, standing, and

influence in this situation?” To curtail anyone’s ability to participate in these ways is to limit their voice in the process. Moreover, voice is not simply accorded to persons; they must *experience* the elements of the TOV in the situation, too. For example, it makes little sense for a person in power to say to another, “Participate fully in this situation, as I command you!” (see Stohl & Cheney, 2001). Similarly, one cannot definitively tell another person, “You have a voice in this process.” While organizers can do their best to set up situations conducive to everyone’s voice, they cannot simply declare that someone’s “voice” has been established. For voice to be realized, participants must *feel* as though they have the capacity to act creatively and meaningfully. With that perspective on voice established, let us now look more closely at each of the elements of the TOV.

Access. The first element addressed by Senecah (2004) is access, which

refers to opportunity, potential, and safety. In its simplest form, it means that I have access to sufficient and appropriate opportunities to express my choices and opinions [... as well as] the opportunity to access sufficient and appropriate support [...] so that I can understand the process in an informed, active capacity, not as a reactionary. (p. 23)

Organizers can enhance access by providing *opportunities to act* and *resources for action*. As an example of statements about access, consider the following excerpt from my interview with a member of the President’s Sustainability Advisory Board (PSAB) at IWU. He told me that the OS should “meet others’ needs, [but] not without question.” Elaborating, he claimed that the Office had helped organize “things across campus that were very scattered before.”

[...] For example, if I want to get recycling in this building, but I don’t know who does recycling, I could call up the Office of Sustainability and say, “We want to get recycling going here. Who do we talk to?” And [the OS] would then put us in touch with the right people and information. I could ask them questions about, “So should we bother with glass? What happens to the glass? Is it worth recycling or does it cost more energy to recycle [...]?” So, they should be able to give

information about things like that and they should know the people on campus who can do that if I want to arrange pick-up of aluminum. They should be able to say, “Okay, call this person. They can come pick up the aluminum for you.” So, [the OS should be] facilitating at that level where, if someone has a sustainability problem that that can be solved, they would know how to solve it.

The OS, according to this interviewee, provides opportunities to individuals who have been unable to solve “sustainability problems” up to this point. As problem solvers, the Office’s employees and partners provide connections, publicize information, and facilitates relationships. That is, the OS enhances others’ (and its own) access to information, people, and systems.

Standing. Standing is the second element of the TOV. Standing “is the civic legitimacy, the respect, the esteem, and the consideration that all stakeholders’ perspectives should be given” (Senecah, 2004, p. 24). Senecah’s use of the term is broader than its meaning in the legal professions, where standing denotes the right of any party to be heard. In the context of environmental organizing, standing should include *respect and regard* for others. In its ideal form, standing means that one’s ideas and identity are appreciated in their own right and not subject to neglect, coercion, or manipulation. Take, for instance, a passage from my interview with a member of the PSAB and vociferous partner with the OS. He points out that sustainability-based arguments/perspectives might not be treated as legitimate without an actual Office of Sustainability at IWU:

It’s an interesting challenge in the sense that, on one hand, I’d like to say particularly where [the OS] positioned in our university—as part of our Facilities [Management] group—they would just be given standing in any conversation about facilities [i.e. buildings and infrastructure]. By standing, I mean they come to the table with the ability to specifically say, “We’re not going to do it that way. We’re going to do it this way.” Or a *range* that allows us to make decisions about how we do certain parts of the business. [...] Beyond that, [there is] the interesting conversation about how exactly we teach and talk about sustainability,

the philosophy of it, the whole concept. I'm starting to see interesting conversations about the idea [of sustainability]—that we really don't know how to teach or talk about it at all. And to some degree, it's the antithesis of the way we normally teach and talk. So how do we make that change and what role does the Office of Sustainability play in that? (Interviewee's emphasis.)

The interviewee was reacting, in part, to the fact that many at IWU still treat sustainability as tangential to the core missions of the university. Instead, he insisted that the OS should try to make sustainability-based decision making the “norm” at IWU. Or, as shown above, they ought to try moving sustainability discourse from “the antithesis of the way we normally teach and talk” to a legitimate part of the conversation about education and educational institutions. In effect, this is a process of developing *standing* for discourses of sustainability and people who would make claims in behalf of sustainability.

Influence. The final element of the TOV, influence

is the outgrowth of access and standing. [...] It means that my ideas have been respectfully considered along with those of other stakeholders and my representative or I was a part of the process that, for example, determined decision criteria and measures alternatives against it. (Senecah, 2004, p. 25)

Influence is the legitimate opportunity to make a difference, according to Senecah's theory, rather than the actual exercise of power. Take, for example, what a campus designer at IWU told me about his early encounters with the OS and Russell Snyder, who was the Office's first director:

Snyder was such an amazingly assertive person. I was really happy to work with him in the initial days of the sustainability program. He called me into his office to talk with groups of students about projects they were working on in those early days. That, I think, was really, really useful and helpful both to them and to me—to be able to share experiences and talk about the projects they were working on.

This campus designer went on to note that Snyder was influential in that “he [was] in a place where people look to him for what is the environmentally correct thing to do.” The

designer *also* stressed students' role in the campus sustainability movement. Snyder, he told me, recognized and empowered students'

desire [...] to create a better world. I want to channel the optimism they have in the right direction and not in any way diminish [...] their enthusiasm [...] Let them go with some information that I can share with them. [...] Respect their enthusiasm.

Using the terms of Senecah's TOV, Snyder and the OS bolstered the students' and the campus designer's *influence* on sustainability matters. The relationship facilitated by the OS was mutually beneficial. In fact, more than a year after the campus designer's first encounter with undergraduates described above, I attended a meeting of the student government's sustainability working group. In the basement of the student union building, this very same designer rolled out a map of the campus showing planned bicycle lanes. The designer explained the logic behind the blueprint, and students asked questions and pointed out how the plans matched (or didn't match) the ways they typically moved through campus. After the meeting, one student commented to me that it was "awesome" that someone "responsible for shaping the campus' future" was willing to meet with students—that they "want and get our input." It is important that the basement meeting was not run or hosted by the OS, though it was inspired by both parties' ongoing relationships with the Office. In short, the communication initiated by the Office of Sustainability enabled the campus designer and interested students to work in concert with one another and offered them *both* the opportunity for meaningful influence in as voices for a more sustainable campus.

Summary

Senecah (2004) usefully conceptualized voice as a trinity of access, standing, and influence. However, Senecah's general theory of the TOV does not speak directly to processes that we might call *building, establishing, or organizing collective voice*. This is particularly important for sustainability officers responsible for representing and empowering organizations' stakeholders on environmental issues. Environmental communication scholars have, up to this point, uncritically adopted Senecah's tripartite framework for voice (e.g., Martin, 2007; Singh, Koku, & Balfors, 2007; Walker, Senecah, & Daniels, 2006). Drawing upon data from my research, I propose that the elements of the TOV can be developed for collectives (and their individual members) through the negotiation of three dialectics. Wise engagement of these ever-present tensions—which, using academic terminology, we might call dialectical praxis—is *the primary means by which individuals organize a sense of voice* on complex environmental issues. Before I describe the DVO, I briefly explain why I think of the elements of the TOV as interpretive repertoires.

Elements of the Trinity of Voice as Interpretive Repertoires

It may be tempting to think of access, standing, and influence as *things* that participants in environmental communication processes *have*. One might also think of the trinity as kinds of *status or privilege* earned by or conferred upon participants. Senecah and others have resisted these definitions. Instead, Senecah (2004) characterizes the elements of the TOV as “the grammars (e.g., the specific tactics, behaviors) of the effective public participation practices of trust” (p. 32). She also says, “The practical

theory of the TOV could be thought of as a sixth-sense savviness and flexibility of knowing how and when to finesse the basic techniques that all public participation specialists should have in their toolboxes” (p. 23). Elsewhere, she treats the TOV as “benchmarks” for assessing the processes’ quality (p. 25). The components of the TOV have also been treated as “templates” for designing collaborative partnerships in a variety of contexts (Walker et al., 2006). Senecah also suggests that “the practical theory of the TOV could be thought of as a sixth-sense savviness and flexibility of knowing how and when to finesse the basic techniques that all public participation specialists should have in their toolboxes” (p. 23).

Rather than treat the TOV as a mysterious “sixth sense” or explicit “tactics” and “behaviors,” I will use the perspective developed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation to conceptualize the components of the TOV. Thus, I will henceforth call access, standing, and influence the *repertoires* of voice. The term “elements” might connote fixity and objective existence to some readers. By contrast, calling the three parts of the TOV groups of interpretive repertoires connects my arguments in this chapter with my earlier theorization of lay theorizing as the structuration of interpretive repertoires. I use the term *repertoires* to draw attention toward the fact that, above all else, the TOV is made up of *interpretations and claims* made (in a particular context) about one’s own, others’, or groups’ voices.

In Chapter 4, I developed a unique perspective on lay theorizing and I provided a detailed summary in Chapter 6, so I will not repeat much of it here. I will simply say that participants in my study did theorize about the status of their own and others’ “voice” on the sustainability-related issues facing IWU. They developed repertoires for talking about

and strategizing for their access, standing, and influence on campus. Let me briefly provide examples that connect each repertoire of the TOV to the theoretical perspective I developed in Chapter 4 and applied first in Chapter 6.

Access as an Interpretive Repertoire: “Getting to the Table” and “Opening Doors”

Early on, officers with the OS established “getting to the table” as a sort of root metaphor for their activity. One long-time volunteer with the Office told me that the OS must “come to the table” and assert a so-called sustainability perspective. Of course, he told me this several years after the OS had been established. Even early on, OS employees were preoccupied with “figuring out where everything was going on” and “what tables we needed to be at,” as it was put during a strategy meeting in the summer of 2008. During what they sometimes called their “entrepreneurial” first year, the OS’ staff members concentrated on meeting as many people as possible and on understanding the (possible) interconnections of operations on campus. Put another way, they sought *access* to as many people and administrative units as possible. Moreover, they sought out and gathered previously neglected data, such as the number of miles university-sponsored faculty and staff travelled by aircraft each year and the number of energy intensive research laboratories on campus.

During the transition out of the Office’s pilot year, however, they began to conceptualize their role as providing *others* access to people and information. The employees’ attention turned toward “identify[ing] the key players [... and trying] to get them around the table.” Staff meetings in the subsequent years frequently involved questions about whether or not “we’re at the table” or “have gotten in the door” for

projects as varied as new buildings and financial planning. Later, the staff would celebrate enabling students and other individuals to “get a sit-down” with people in power, and would ask whether “the door is open” before anyone “kick[s] it down.”

These architectural metaphors were one of several means by which participants in my study gauged whether or not they had meaningful *access* and whether they could realize it for others. The employees and partners of the OS developed adaptable, stylized patterns for interpreting and talking about whether or not people had meaningful information about and opportunities for involvement in sustainability-related matters at IWU—interpretive repertoires of accesses, in other words.

Standing as an Interpretive Repertoire: “License”

Perhaps the best example of talk about “standing” in the case I studied is the idea of “license.” This statement from Lillian Valmer epitomizes the theme:

I’m excited about the rapid progress that has been made. There is some sort of institutional commitment now to this group [meaning the OS]. [...] I guess I just love feeling like we’re enabling people, in their own spirit of influence, to actually do stuff. Sort of giving license to get things done. I remember when I was directing those [public forums about the possibility of a formal Office of Sustainability]. A guy came up afterwards, and he said, “You know, we’ve been waiting for ten years for this to happen.”

Notice how she frames the OS as “enabling people, in their own spirit of influence.” As you will recall from Chapter 6, the Office’s employees and partners did not like the idea that they “told people what to do.” On the contrary, they sought out individuals who had a preexisting desire to take action on sustainability in their “corner” of the university. In staff and Steering Committee meetings, we would regularly discuss how the Office might “endorse,” “dialogue with,” or “partner with” others who faced obstacles in making change. Doing this, we asserted, enhanced the other party’s standing and the legitimacy

of sustainability-related claims, as the “guy [who] came up afterward” seemed to be saying to Lillian Valmer.

For instance, a PSAB member told Office employees about a School of Nursing employee who had been spending time researching recycling opportunities at IWU and at an affiliated hospital. Upon hearing about this activity, her supervisor instructed her to “drop it” because recycling was “not part of her job.” I do not know if any meeting took place, but OS employees, the PSAB member, and I did talk about whether a representative of the Office should formally meet with the Nursing School supervisor. After all, the President had formally committed IWU to reducing its solid waste output. Furthermore, we conjectured, OS representatives could make the Nursing School employee’s activity look “entrepreneurial,” and they might try to “give her license” to continue her work by linking the activity to university-level priorities. This, we thought, might “give some weight” to what she had done in the eyes of her supervisor.

Our discussion focused explicitly on how the OS might enhance the Nursing School employee’s *standing*, as well as on whether or not the OS might have standing with the Nursing School’s administrators. For some, the best way to enhance the standing of environmental voices was to embed sustainability in the language used by the university’s administrators. As an interviewee explained to me,

If my boss tells me to do something and he [or she] gives me permission to do it, I don’t have to think about it, you know? I don’t have to worry about it. I just have to do it. I have to figure out a way to do it.

As time passed, OS employees and partners worried less about the OS’s ability to “give voice” to sustainability perspectives on almost any matter at IWU. Instead, they began to

assume it. After a while, simply aligning oneself with the OS seemed to “give license” to take action on sustainability.

Influence as an Interpretive Repertoire: “Leading by Example”

Chapter 6 dealt entirely with communication related to influence. For that reason, I will not dwell upon the interpretive repertoires connected with influence as a component of voice. In the “leading by example” repertoire, for example, influence was idealized as the genuine, impassioned expression of one’s enduring commitment to sustainability principles. As a form of “meaningful participation in processes where their ideas matter” (i.e., influence, as defined by Walker et al., 2006, p. 194), the implicit theory at IWU seemed to be that “leading by example” demonstrated one’s ardent positions on environmental matters without being “imposing” or “pushy,” ensuring that one would be “taken seriously” and thought of as a “reasonable” person (see Chapter 8). One lesson of Chapter 6 was that “advocacy” and other forms of influence took on multiple forms in the language of the OS’s employees and supporters. Sustainability advocates used repertoires that bear upon this idea of influence to explore whether or not they “had” it, were exercising it appropriately, and so forth.

Summary

I have established that the TOV may be thought of in terms of interpretive repertoires of access, standing, and influence. While participants in my study did not frequently use these terms, they did occasionally discuss the significance of “voice.” This was especially true when they talked about the effort that led up to the Office’s establishment in 2007. For example:

I think a big push to develop this Office was when these forums started and, suddenly, people are standing up [and saying], “The University does nothing.” And people were just angry. Even on a small scale, [people with the] Plant Operations side of things were saying, “Geez, absolutely no one is aware of anything we’ve done. We’ve done nothing to publicize the measures that we’ve taken to retrofit the campus and make it more energy efficient.” So, there needs to be a voice behind some of these efforts. I think the University was doing them for the right reasons—you know, to save money for the University [...] sustainable from, you know, a financial perspective. But I think that having a voice, when people do the right thing, something that kind of helps perpetuate recognition for doing the right thing, you feel good about it. Someone else makes sure you feel good about it, and that kind of helps keep it going. When people go above and beyond to do the right thing, there’s a source of publicity for those people.

In this statement, the interviewee clearly links voice with “publicizing” and raising “awareness” of progressive change (i.e., visibility and leadership). She also implies that the OS *now* responds to and puts in contact people quietly “taking measures” and those who were “angry” that “the University does nothing” (i.e., it facilitates relationships). Moreover, later in the interview she pointed out that the Office has an expansive view of what it means to do sustainability “for the right reasons.” Prior to the establishment of the Office, the “Plant Operations side of things” did not usually communicate their work in terms of sustainability, and they received little acknowledgement or appreciation from “outsiders” as a result. So, we can infer that “being a voice” for sustainability also involves the negotiation of what qualifies as “doing the right thing” or “the right reason” for doing something (i.e., a question of motivation). The model of *voice organizing* that I develop in the next section accounts for these sorts of dynamics.

I decided to extend Senecah’s theory after consulting participants in the study. As I reflected upon the participant observation and interview data I gathered, I found Senecah’s (2004) theory applicable to the objectives and history of the OS. Testing my sense that the TOV was a relevant construct, I introduced it to participants during the

group interviews. One response was that the TOV “made sense,” though “I’m not sure I’ve used the term” voice to describe what the Office does. In a different group interview, one participant said of the TOV, “I think this is crucial.” He asked me how it is that individuals or groups “develop [access, standing, and voice] in the first place.” I did not have an answer and directed the question to the group, which engaged in discussion.

The model of voice organizing that I present below is a response to those group interview sessions. It fuses the etic terms (i.e., theoretic, deductively derived language) of the TOV with emic terminology (i.e., case specific, inductively derived language) used by participants in my study. By (1) treating access, standing, and influences as interpretive repertoires, and (2) focusing on the dialectical tensions experienced by the sustainability officers in my study, I aim to conceptualize voice in more *dynamic* terms.

The Dialectics of Voice Organizing

I have established that access, standing, and influence may be thought of as interpretive repertoires. The goal of Senecah’s (2004) TOV is enhanced trust and community capacity. An important question is thus: how do sustainability experience and negotiate their work organizing people’s collective sense of access, standing, and influence? I offer the dialectics of voice organizing (DVO) as one possible answer.⁴

Figure 6.1 illustrates the DVO. The model appears as a triangle with six parts. The *repertoires of the TOV* are shown as three circles, each situated at one of the points of the triangle. As Senecah (2004) argues, each of these three is required to support the others and ensure the voice of participants in environmental processes. Each of the triangle’s “sides” is a bidirectional arrow. Within the arrows are the *dialectics of voice organizing*: facilitation, leadership, and motivation.

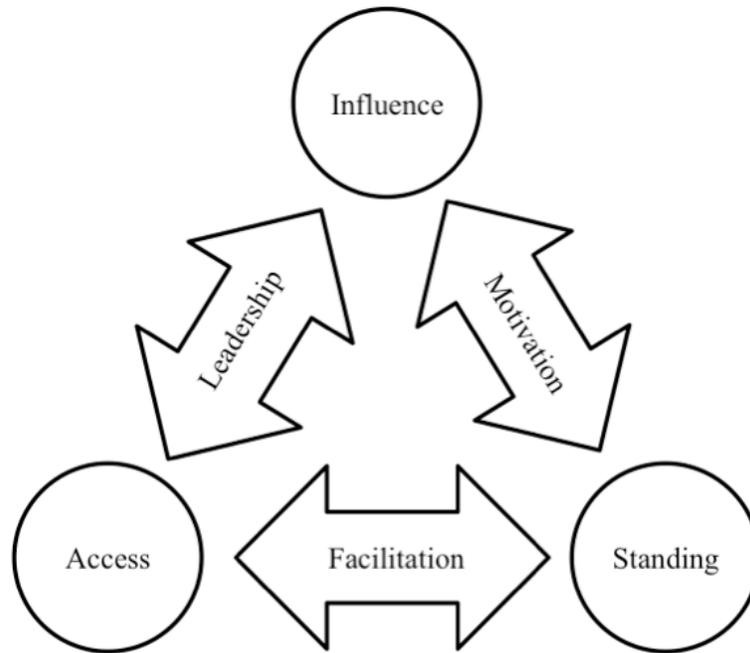


Figure 6.1. The Dialectics of Voice Organizing

The arrows do *not* signify a simple causal relationship between the TOV and the dialectics of voice organizing. Taken as a whole, the figure depicts *organizing and balancing* the TOV as a lively process of negotiating at least three dialectical tensions. For example, the dialectic of facilitation is *manifested in* the interplay between the development of access and the development of standing. Participants accounted for communication that enhanced access, standing, and influence in their statements about the OS' organizing activities. When we view their statements about communication that enhances access, standing, and voice in relation to one another, the three dialectics come into view. In this section, I account for those three—dialectics of facilitation, leadership, and motivation—in the case of IWU's Office of Sustainability.

As relational and organizational *dialectics*, these ever-present tensions cannot be completely resolved or eliminated (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Papa, Singhal, & Papa, 2006). These dialectical tensions are the necessary push-and-pull involved when people work to give voice an organized quality or character. Organizing involves dialectics for at least three reasons: (1) people bring contradictory desires to the organizing process, (2) organizations pursue multiple and sometimes conflicting goals, and (3) organizations are made “real” in part through the negotiation of what symbols mean (see Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004; Eisenberg, 1984; Hawes, 1974; Putnam, 1986; Tracy, 2004; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004).

I argue that the sustainability officers can organize and enhance voice by strategically engaging the three dialectics associated with Senecah’s (2004) TOV. Specifically, (1) negotiating the dialectic of facilitation may serve the collective’s access and standing; (2) working through the dialectic of leadership can bolster its access and influence; (3) managing the dialectic of motivation could add to its standing and influence. I do not offer any definitive prescription for how to do this. Instead, I encourage scholars and practitioners to think creatively, applying and adapting the model provided here to different situations.

The Dialectic of Facilitation: Access ↔ Standing

The dialectic of facilitation involves efforts to bolster access and standing for IWU’s sustainability advocates. Participants in this study described facilitation as providing *others* with the resources, contacts, and information required for action/change. It is important to stress that, for participants in this study, “facilitating change” meant aiding in the accomplishment of others’ goals. Those goals might be ambiguous or open

for revision, but participants used the term facilitation to describe the Office's attempts to *empower others to discover, set, and realize* new sustainability-related objectives. As one participant put it:

I think facilitating is very important because that means you're just looking to see, if you want to do something, you have to identify the key players. You have to try to get them around the table. And by doing that you can actually have the energy come from having different views of people focusing on the same thing, versus controlling, which [... means being] responsible to delegate to get things done [and...] follow up to make sure it's accomplished.

Facilitation entails connecting different groups of people and resources *as well as* enabling them work together productively on sustainability-related initiatives. This involves simultaneously enhancing stakeholders' access and standing with one another.

Repertoires associated with access and standing. When talking about communication that serves *access*, one repertoire employed by participants revolved around the idea of *connecting*. When talking about communication in the interest of *standing*, participants developed a repertoire centered on the idea of *dialoguing*. These two poles of facilitation—each serving access and standing, respectively—are in productive tension with one another (i.e., they are in a dialectical relationship).

Connecting involved the creative combination of people and elements of a system; participants did not use the term to connote much beyond simply “putting pieces together.” As the one-time Interim Director of the OS told me, “Connect: getting these people talking to these [other] people so that they can—maybe, on their own, they wouldn't get very far—but they start working together and can start [up] solutions that can actually make something happen.” He told me that the Office employees act in many ways like a “catalyst [...] thrown into the university mix.” He pointed out that, because the OS employed just three people, it had to create and leverage connections to realize its

aspirations: “We have these three people, but it’s not [just] the three people. They pull in and attract through their connections a lot more that makes this catalyst work.”

Connecting is simply putting people in touch with resources (e.g., people, data) that may help them realize their aspirations—enhancing *access*, in other words.

Participants in this study talked about dialogue, on the other hand, as a kind of *opening up* in relationships. As in scholarly publications, sustainability advocates at IWU also defined dialogues as deeply personal and mutually transformative conversations. For instance, Lillian Valmer told me that one of the most effective ways to organize for sustainability is

starting conversations, dialogues, getting people to really recognize an issue instead of just brushing it under the rug. We really have to bring it out into the forefront and really think about it. And oftentimes, once you get that dialogue started, people will start making good decisions of their own and really will change as a result of their heart changing. That's what I'm most interested in: to inspire people to connect with issues on a deeper level and question their own life and look at how they can heal their own situation.

While it is related to “making connections,” participants in this study spoke of dialogue as a much more intense process of “opening up” and “coming together” in the interest of sustainability, a process by which people engage sustainability “on a deeper level” that deepens their commitment to one another and to the broader interests of IWU.

These, then, are two repertoires developed by participants to talk about the OS’s organizational work that enhances access and standing for and amongst IWU’s sustainability advocates. When we consider these two repertoires in relation to one another, under the broader heading of *facilitation*, we can see how cultivating access and standing involves a productive engagement of dialectical tension.

Dialectical tension between access and standing. On the one hand, IWU's sustainability officers talked about connecting and the promotion of access as an essential part of the process of gaining a "systems perspective" on the campus. It was, for instance, an article of faith that "making the campus more sustainable" required "thinking in terms of systems." But, many participants told me that systems thinking is consistently thwarted by "bureaucracy," "siloeing," and "not seeing the consequences" of actions. As a result, employees of the OS try to gather together unfamiliar people and new information to "see what happens"—they promote greater access through *connecting*, in other words. One member of the Steering Committee explained the OS's connecting role through the example of building design. He mentioned that it is difficult to get everyone involved in building projects—from benefactors, to construction firms, to prospective building occupants—to buy into sustainable design practices.

[For example, I want to promote] the concept of how to design a building [using] natural daylight instead of fluorescent light. All that kind of stuff is something that [... I hope] everybody would become aware of. And I don't know, hopefully it will get into their heads somehow. It's not going to get in throughout administrative people or me. [...] I don't know how to voice it, though. The criteria by which the administrative people are put into their positions don't necessarily require an environmental awareness.

The Office of Sustainability, he noted, could put various groups together in order to generate new ideas and "a very a global vision of what the campus should look like." The idea is that "everybody learns" from such encounters, thus making new, sustainability-based (i.e., systemic) perspectives possible.

On the other hand, the new connections can lead to frustration and conflict. After all, few individuals are willing to "take the blame" for unsustainable organizational structure, as one person said during a group interview. But, more importantly, the newly

connected partners in sustainability organizing need to be able to speak and work clearly and efficiently with one another (see Thompson, 2009). In some cases, this involves technical problems. For instance, “outsiders” now connected to “insiders” may not understand the jargon used to certain professions. In other cases, ideological conflict is involved (see Howard & Geist, 1995). For example, different members of the PSAB expressed concern that other board members’ view of sustainability was “fiscally irresponsible” (in that it demanded sweeping and “expensive” changes) or “watered down” (in that it limited change to projects with very short “pay back”). On the surface, these two positions might seem to be in conflict. So, the unique interactions made possible through *connecting* can produce conflicts, rifts, confusion, and the like—but perhaps also inspiration, new perspectives, unique solutions, and greater collective power.

Thus, sustainability officers encourage *dialoguing* and other standing-related communication in an effort to resolve conflicts, make groups sensible to one another, and ensure that everyone involved feels as though they have been given respect. Yasmine Meadows was heavily involved in campus gardening and the on-campus farmers market. She explained to me how OS facilitation was crucial to the success of student’s food-related initiatives. The Office helped, she said, by

facilitating, creating a forum for that dialogue to happen. As I had mentioned, the Office is a key connector for linking students with different entities on campus so that they can create partnerships and then address certain issues. For example, with my projects I have to have a really close relationship with Plant Operations in order to get the campus gardens actually running because they’re the ones who are in charge of the watering systems and advising us [so that...] the garden doesn’t become an eyesore and is well maintained. So, yes, [we need] great facilitators linking people together, finding those who share some of the same ideas or the same passions, and just making creating systems for a movement or a project to actually come to fruition.

This statement nicely presents facilitation as creative activity in the space between connecting and dialoguing, if you will. As Meadows implies, facilitating is “creating systems for a movement or project to actually come to fruition” by “linking” and fostering “really close relationships.”

Summary. A member of the PSAB told me, “Connecting [and] dialoguing [...] They’re different sides of pretty much the same coin, if you like.” Interview statements such as this first cued me to thinking about voice organizing as a dialectical activity. Facilitating is an important activity for voice organizers; it primarily serves to enhance participants’ access and standing. It is important to continually foster new connections (i.e., greater access to people and resources) and facilitate the new relationship through ongoing dialogue (i.e., encourage participants to maintain high regard for participants and stakeholders with whom they now have a more intensive relationship). Failing to continually renegotiate access threatens to turn dialoguing into “reinventing the wheel,” “covering the same ground,” “beating a dead horse,” and “preaching to the choir”—all colloquialisms used by participants in this study. Thus, we can think of *facilitation* as an activity that “balances” the cultivation of access and standing in the development of a collective voice on environmental issues.

The Dialectic of Leadership: Access ↔ Influence

The second dialectic of voice organizing involves questions about leadership. Participants in this study struggled over how much and in what ways the Office of Sustainability should “take the lead on,” “be out in front for,” and “be the face of” environmental efforts on campus. At the same time, the majority of participants told me

that sustainability-related efforts on campus were “fragmented,” “scattered,” or “invisible” to one another prior to the Office’s establishment. One partner with the OS told me that, early on, “There started to be that discussion of [the fact that] there should be an office to *publicize some of these things* and *coordinate some of these very fragmented efforts* that are happening all over campus” (emphasis mine). This was a common refrain early in the life of the Office: It must publicize what others are doing on campus to “raise awareness” and “coordinate” just enough to get people to feel like “we’re working together” in the push for sustainability. The dialectic of leadership exists *at the intersection of access and influence*—which participants discussed through repertoires of publicizing and coordinating, respectively.

Repertoires associated with access and influence. Participants associated two specific communication-related concepts with the two poles of the dialectic of leadership: publicizing and coordinating. Participants used *publicizing* to refer to broadcasting others’ information as widely as possible. For example, one interviewee told me that publicizing is

the communication that has to do with what’s already happening; to be that voice, so [IWU stakeholders] hear what is happening with the recycling program [for example]. What is happening with energy management? What is happening with water sustainability or more efficient buildings or all the different things we’ve been looking at?

So, publicizing is “giving voice” by raising awareness of the status of things, by collecting and disseminating information as widely as possible. At base, it is defined by relatively impersonal communication to a mass or broad collection of people.⁵ In the words of another interviewee,

I think there’s so much stuff that goes on on campus that people don’t have a clue what’s happening. [...] What [the OS] does is give a place for people to go and

[...] look and see what's going on on campus that has to do with sustainability on campus. I think that's really important for people to get to know. And not only what is going on, but what's the campus doing, because I don't think anybody has their arms around what we're doing for sustainability on this campus like the Sustainability Office does. [...] The OS is] a great communicator, publicizer of what's going on on campus.

Publicizing then, was another way in which participants talked about the development of access—to information, knowledge, and schedules that people could use to act in an informed way.

While publicizing denoted for participants very little involvement or influence on the part of the OS, the repertoire centered on the term *coordinating* was associated with administration, primary responsibility, and giving directions. In other words, coordination and related concepts were one way in which participants made sense of the Office's role in augmenting sustainability advocates' influence on campus. A graduate student partnered with the OS told me that “coordinating any environmental activities” would be one of the “first” terms she would use to describe the OS's work. Of the Office's “coordinating/managing” role, she said:

[...] being part of the planning activities of the University. I guess that the office needs to be part of the planning. [...] Like being part of the planning process for the university [...] involving] some type of sustainability-related issues. I mean we need to—not plan our activities, because it's obvious everyone needs to do that—but plan the University's activities. We will be part of the planning. And again, coordinating and managing is part of the active management of IWU.

In many staff meetings, Office staff and I would discuss how “active” or “out front” they should be when it came to planning and coordinating various processes. In this way, the OS might act as *the* apparent leader of and voice for a range of supporters by taking an active role in the coordination and management of initiatives. Still, as I discussed above and in Chapter 6, these same people were usually reluctant to “give directions” and “be

managers.” The nature and degree of the OS’s leadership on sustainability-related matters at IWU remains an open question to this point.

Dialectical tension between access and influence. This dialectic involves *tension* inasmuch as the Office’s employees “can’t do everything” but must take primary responsibility for some activities in order to “get the ball rolling.” Consider the difference between the following two interview statements. Speaking about Office staff, one woman told me, “I see them very clearly in a leadership role” that involves both creating “different opportunities for people to be involved in sustainability, as well as just practical things [...] really trying to be the hub to coordinate all the different efforts [on campus].” Her statement positions the Office as an active partner, as doing more than simply initiating and monitoring new interactions and opportunities. By contrast, a different interviewee told me, “I don’t like any of the words that would suggest that their hands are in it: coordinating, overseeing.” He acknowledged that IWU is “such a fragmented organization,” where

information [and ...] many other things [...] all happen so many places that until and unless there is a better way to collect it all for purposes of sustainability analysis, there may be some level of this [meaning “leadership” and “coordination”] that’s required of the OS, which is occurring, I think, now in a very difficult way.

The second interviewee preferred that OS staff members (1) resist getting actively involved with specific initiatives and (2) favor their role in promoting access to the wealth of different sustainability-related initiatives already underway. The first interviewee disagreed, encouraging the OS’s role as a “hub for coordinating all the different efforts.” In the language sometimes used by participants, this struggle concerns

how the OS should “be leading” or “take a leadership role” on IWU’s sustainability-related activities.

Summary. Sustainability officers in this case study experienced a dialectical tension concerning the nature and degree of their leadership. How involved should officers be in sorting information, structuring interaction, and designing strategy? One study participant told me that, “If the Office did nothing but publicize the rest of what’s going on at the university, it would still be incredibly useful.” However, Office staff and volunteers desire a more active, influential role for the organization, as well.

In this way, the Office negotiates a *leadership* role that balances coordinating and publicizing. Publicizing enhances *access* by making information public and generally available. Coordinating, on the other hand, enhances participants’ *influence* in that their work is given shape and legitimacy when attached to the Office’s mission and oversight. In practice, sustainability officers can negotiate a context-appropriate leadership role through both publicizing and coordinating.

The Dialectic of Motivation: Standing ↔ Influence

The third and last of the DVO involves *motivation*. We can define motivation in two ways, and I will emphasize the second definition. First, motivation can be understood in its conventional sense as a “mental state driving acts” (see Benoit, 1996, pp. 67-69). Second, we can define motivation according to the meaning of “motive” in the work of Kenneth Burke (1969a, 1969b) and C. Wright Mills (1940). Motives, in this second sense, are constellations of symbols and meaning (i.e., grammars or vocabularies) that people use to construct accounts of themselves and the world. Benoit (1996) calls these “motives as accounts,” meaning “utterances that usually occur after actions, intended to

explain, justify, characterize or interpret those actions” (p. 70). This second definition for *motivation* draws our attention more to communication and discourse than to individuals’ psychological state.

Let us explore an example with this second definition in mind. During the course of my participant observation, it was not uncommon for one person to frame sustainability-related organizational change as “taking fiscal responsibility” and another to frame it as “sustainable development for future generations.” Imagine these two people working on the same advisory board or as part of a discussion on the reduction of energy use in a particular building. The two symbolic constructions—fiscal responsibility and future-oriented sustainability— may suggest certain ideologies, ethics, and logical premises that, in turn, might overlap, conflict, or remain distinct. In any case, the two individuals are employing different vocabularies of motive, to use Mills’ (1940) phrase. The two motives are consequential—that is, they affect what people do and experience—but they are not deterministic. They are not final or closed, in other words. Our two imagined people might struggle to make their motive more dominant in the situation, they may cooperate productively from both perspectives, or they might proceed by way of a transcendent goal. Regardless, I am simply pointing out that the distinctness of these motives presents people who wish to *organize voice* with a problem. The dialectic of motivation is grounded in the problems associated with both influence and standing.

Repertoires associated with standing and influence. Participants in my study had to negotiate which motives they invoked in various situations, and they had to deal with a variety of motivations for people that they hoped to influence. On one side of the dialectic, Office employees and partners talked about *collaboration*, which they defined

in terms of cooperative projects in which different parties brought different interests, values, and such to bear on the work at hand. The repertoire they built around the concept of collaboration was associated with the cultivation of *standing* and defined by (1) people's work together on specific projects in which (2) participants were able to maintain their differences. In that way, the parties involved increased their sense of interdependence and respect for one another's motivation (see Daniels & Walker, 2001).

For example, one interviewee recalled

a time when there was sort of no the discussion between the Office of Sustainability [and ...] people of the mindset that existed in Campus Design and Construction. There wasn't a common, sort of, bringing together of design goals and things like that [i.e., sustainability]. Just being able to make the missions one, sort of. I think, prior to the Office of Sustainability, if it didn't have a financial benefit, it wasn't considered. Despite the lifecycle cost and those things, [projects that didn't have obvious "financial benefit"] just weren't looked at. I think they've been able to collaborate the efforts of what has been happening forever and the mission of sustainability, sort of [making] the goals [that IWU sets] more reflective.

Focus your attention on the last few lines. The interviewee frames the Office's collaboration as the harmonization of "what's been happening forever" at Campus Design and Construction and "the mission of sustainability," which was formally recognized by IWU's administration only recently. The interviewee does not outright reject "financial benefit" thinking, nor does he advocate the unreflective pursuit of sustainability. The two motivations might sometimes be in tension, but the interviewee credits the Office of Sustainability for maintaining the standing and collaborative work of people with different motivations.

On the other side of this dialectic, participants addressed enhanced *influence* with a repertoire centered on *persuading*. The participants' treated persuasion as communication in the service of influence or communication used explicitly to create

change (in others' thought, attitudes, behavior, etc.). Very often, they characterized persuasion as placing some motivations in a hierarchical position above the others.⁶ Persuasion can enhance the influence of an "organized voice" through establishment of legitimated, dominant, popular, or transcendent motives. For example, I sat in on a meeting between OS staff and administrators responsible for purchasing at IWU. One of the purchasing administrators showed significant enthusiasm. He brought a number of catalogues featuring recycled or "eco-friendly" products, saying, "There really is a lot out there!" He told those of us at the meeting that he "hadn't seriously thought about" sustainability until being asked to meet with the OS for the first time. "It's really exciting," he told us, to discover that a professional association he belonged to had recently taken up sustainability as a core concern or value. At the end of the meeting, he said he was enthusiastic about having a "new challenge" that would require "a lot of work." In short, the purchasing official was persuaded to give (some degree of) primacy to *sustainability as a motive* in his work and relationship with the OS. Over the next year, Office staff members told me that they would email the purchasing administrator to ask what was new "on the sustainability front" or to ask for assistance on an initiative. Most every time, the Office employee I was talking to would remark about how pleased they were that he seemed "excited" or "really into it." His newfound motivation to pursue sustainability enhanced the Office's (and others') influence when speaking up for change related to University purchasing policies.

Dialectical tension between standing and influence. The tension at the heart of the dialectic of motivation is whether to (1) acknowledge and preserve a variety of motivations or (2) enhance the status of some motives over others. Participants in my

study did not always advocate putting sustainability first. For example, one student partner with the OS told me that persuasion requires that you “connect with people's value systems. And in the message is the delivery, too.” In some cases, she explained, sustainability advocates are able to influence other people by promoting values other than sustainability. But different frames may also limit sustainability officers' ability to persuade others to take on long-term problems, as one interviewee told me:

The problem with the University is everyone sees the bottom line and upfront costs, and they don't consider what it's going to cost down the road if these things [e.g., inefficient resource use, environmental impact] aren't taken into consideration. Even from a financial perspective, because that's not as big of a concern and someone else can deal with that. “I'll be retired by then,” or whatever.

Accordingly, motives associated *strongly* with sustainability may be more or less effective when trying to get people to endorse organizational change. Similarly, motivations *loosely* associated with sustainability can be effective for the purposes of influencing others or fostering collaboration, but they might limit the scope and depth of that change. There is an inherent tension, then, in balancing (1) *collaborative* partnerships that play to divergent motivations and enhance partners' sense of *standing* with (2) the desire to *persuade* people that some motivations are more suitable in the pursuit of sustainability, thus enhancing the *influence* of certain voices and perspectives.

Summary. As a final example of the dialectic of motivation, consider this interviewee's claims about collaborating with academic officials on building efficiency projects:

That whole discussion or conversation is always a challenging one because our culture, meaning what you'll find typically at universities and colleges, tends to be one of hoarders. A dean or somebody who is responsible for space will capture space, will want to control it for their uses—be it for programmatic features, for educational or instruction features, for research, etc.—because there is no

disincentive to hoard. If you have it then you have more flexibility for whatever your programmatic needs are. As is the case in many universities, there's all these hoarders and the like who equate being able to have more space as [status] and power. It changes and it varies at all universities, I'm sure, but by and large it's very inefficient. So, to the extent that we apply our influence and advice to those that have the power to drive, instruct, and direct the use of space on our campus, we try to do that in a proactive, supportive, business, logical [manner]. Administrators who do value our judgment, our credible judgment, [... we can] hope [that they] make the best decision for the University.

This person creatively straddles the space between persuasion and collaboration— between cultivating standing and influence, if you will. He does promote “applying our influence” to change academic officials’ interpretation of excess space from “power” to “inefficiency.” At the same time, he validates the officials’ “power to drive, instruct, and direct the use of space” and casts sustainability advocates as people with “advice” and “credible judgment.” Advice and judgment are rendered in a “proactive, supportive, business, logical [manner],” which are terms I regularly heard associated with collaboration at IWU. Thus, he reframes the dialectic by casting the OS in a dual role, as *both* persuaders applying influence *and* partners providing advice in collaboration with respected others. Managing these choices and their consequences is the heart of the dialectic of motivation.

Summary of the Dialectics of Voice Organizing

My argument is that organizing voice on environmental matters is a dialectical process. I proposed that sustainability officers in this case engaged three persistent tensions in order to build or manage collective voice: *the dialectics of facilitation, leadership, and motivation*. Using participants’ language, I proposed that (1) the dialectic of facilitation involved the interplay of access and standing, (2) the dialectic of leadership involved the cultivation of both access and influence, and (3) the dialectic of motivation

involved balancing the development of standing and influence. I argue that enhancing the access, standing, and influence of collectives can be accomplished through careful, diligent engagement with these dialectics. Scholars of organization studies have shown that collective voices are never settled; they are inherently political, always negotiated, and influenced by context. I offer the DVO to clarify the challenges sustainability officers will likely confront in their work, rather than as an overly general and inflexible prescription for voice organizing.

Discussion and Conclusion

I close this chapter by considering different ways for framing the characteristics of voice and voice organizing addressed in this chapter. I have defined collective voice as (1) the continuous processes engaged by people (2) using discourse and texts in order to (3) constitute and maintain collective communication patterns (4) with ethical, emotional, or identity-related dimensions (5) related to access, standing, and influence in a variety of situations. In addition, I have described three dialectics that voice organizers might confront in their attempt to realize the TOV. It is worth reflecting on the content of this chapter through three different frames: (1) voice as inclusive and/or expansive, (2) voice as strategic and/or tactical, and (3) voice as ambiguous and/or flexible. These different approaches to voice hint at different ways in which sustainability officers can respond to the dialectics of voice organizing.

Voice as Inclusive and/or Expansive

The first frame encourages us to think of collective voice as something increasingly comprehensive or all encompassing. From this perspective, we might think

of *a voice* as a common point of reference or as holistic representations and images of organizations—their “social presence,” to use Cheney and McMillan’s (1990, p. 100) term. Working from this frame, organizers might attempt to forge an environmental voice that is as broad as possible—a kind of “umbrella” for many different people. A voice’s legitimacy might then be judged according to whether it appropriately represents the diversity and range of the collective. The inclusive/expansive frame for voice has a democratic spirit.⁷

However, the inclusive/expansive frame for voice might also reflect managerialist desire for evermore control over organizational processes and personnel. An attempt to build collective voice that “covers everyone” could be thought of as a kind of communication “*program* [...] enacted by managers on employees, thus always reaffirming the controlling, parental position and, as we would expect, extending managerial interests” (Deetz, 1995, p. 4, emphasis in original). People might be encouraged (implicitly or explicitly), even forced, to “toe the company line” or “walk the organization’s talk” by supervisors and peers, deepening the injustice of such a collective voice (see Barker, 1993). In any case, we should acknowledge the democratic ethos of this first frame but recognize its limitations and possible pitfalls. After all, “communication is not everything to the organization and voice is not everything to the worker” (Cheney & Cloud, 2006, p. 504).

Voice as Strategic and/or Tactical

We may also think about building a collective voice as the cultivation of “a strategically designed persona” (Cheney, Christensen, Conrad & Lair, 2004, p. 91). This second frame for voice orients us to the rhetorical and audience-centered nature of

meaningful participation and representation in organizational issues. Invoking “a voice” may be a persuasive technique more than it is an authentic representation of one’s identity or identification with a collective. Indeed, people *invent* subjectivities in rhetoric, beyond merely speaking through them (Charland, 1987).⁸

Of course, the risk of a strategic/tactical approach to voice is that the person presuming to speak for or with any given “voice” may appear insincere, inauthentic, or manipulative. The person embodying the voice might be perceived to be “issue selling” (Dutton, Ashford, O’Neill, & Lawrence, 2001), meaning that they talk about an issue in a certain way primarily to gain the attention of powerful people, or “issue crafting” (Sonenshein, 2006), meaning that they emphasize popular justifications for an issue or course of action in their communication while deemphasizing their (different) personal feelings and motivations. In some contexts, communication partners may think that such strategic communication is completely appropriate; in others, they may believe it to be an ethical transgression. Regardless, we can frame “voice” as a tactically designed identity or persuasive symbolic construction.

Voice as Ambiguous and/or Flexible

Third and finally, we can frame voice as an ambiguous and shifting “figure” with an unclear relationship to the people that are its “ground.” That is, to speak of anything as an *organized voice* gives it a sense of materiality and physicality that obscures the fact that it is largely *symbolic* (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008; Deetz, Tracy, & Simpson, 2000). Specific people embody a collective voice *and* are superseded by it. Thus, it can be useful to frame the concept of voice as malleable and vague.⁹

There are a number of well-known concepts and arguments in organization studies that adopt this third frame. Organization scholars have described organizations as polyphonic collectives (Hazen, 1993), flexible bodies (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008), as *organized dissonance* (Ashcraft, 2001). Various scholars have explored the way in which ambiguity and “loose” relationships affect organizing processes (see, e.g., Eisenberg, 1984, 1990; Granovetter, 1973; Orton & Weick, 1990). An important lesson of this assorted body of work is that voice is mutable and indefinite, at once something embodied by real people and something “more” (see Watts, 2001).

Summary

In this chapter, I have attempted to put organizational communication and environmental communication perspectives on *voice* into conversation. I have done so by extending Senecah’s (2004) environmental communication theory of the TOV so that it is responsive to perspectives on voice from organization studies. Specifically, I have argued that people charged with organizing collective voices on environmental issues will confront at least three dialectical tensions. When voice organizers navigate the dialectics of facilitation, leadership, and motivation, they have opportunities to moderate and enhance persons’ access, standing, and influence. I have pointed out, however, that we might frame any collective voice that results in at least three ways: as inclusive and/or expansive, as strategic and/or tactical, and as ambiguous and/or flexible.

In the end, I offer readers *suggestions* for thinking about the difficult and discontinuous process that most sustainability officers (and other intraorganizational campaigners) will face, rather than prescriptions for action. Still, I believe that the voice concept and DVO are useful for scholars and practitioners. As Hirschman (1970) puts it:

“In a whole gamut of human institutions, from the state to the family, voice, however ‘cubmrous,’ is all their members normally have to work with” (p. 17).

Notes

¹ This chapter approaches the subject of lay theorizing in a somewhat different way than Chapters 6 or 8. I do explain why the elements of the trinity of voice can be treated as interpretive repertoires rather than abilities or benchmarks. Nevertheless, this chapter involves etic accounts and theoretically driven analysis to a greater extent than the other chapters. Here, I emphasize Craig's (1999) description of the role of communication scholarship as "*transforming* commonplaces of practical metadiscourse [i.e., lay theories of communication ...] into theoretical axioms or empirical hypotheses" (p. 128, emphasis mine). As I explain elsewhere in this chapter, the dialectics I have discussed in this chapter resulted from my attempt to give the *range* of performances and utterances at play in the research site some clarity and an axiomatic structure. This analysis chapter involved a greater degree of "transformation" than the others.

² I should note that a numbers of scholars have argued that organizations *and* people both "speak," but differently (see e.g., Cheney, 1992; Crable, 1990). Also see Chapter 4 for my discussion of organizations as "discursively constructed" or "symbolically constructed." Finally, I should note that voice of any entity exists in the *interplay* of texts and embodied performance over time (Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008; Watts, 2001). Though the metaphor of voice suggests a speaking subject (Putnam & Boys, 2006), I intend to treat voice as something made up of speech, performance, and texts.

³ It is important to note that these sources all discuss cases of social movement organizing. The concept of voice is relevant to scholarship dealing with rhetoric, especially social movement/social protest rhetoric. This chapter is meant to connect organizational and environmental communication scholarship, so I will opt to point readers to Watts' (2001) review for rhetorical perspectives on voice, in which he notes that "there are more than a hundred examples of work done over the last 15 years that refer explicitly or implicitly to rhetoric's capacity to give 'voice' to the other" (p. 193).

⁴ I should comment upon how the model ought to be "read." This model is the result of *interpretation* of a case of environmental communication organizing. I constructed the model by, first, making sense of patterns in the way participants *talked about communication and organizing*. As I began to sort codes for their metacommunication and refine my interpretations, I consulted existing theory. I found that Senecah's (2004) theory of the TOV offered a compelling but incomplete account of the data. I then engaged in an iterative process of comparing and fusing Senecah's TOV with my observations about the dialectical tensions facing the employees of the IWU Office of Sustainability. The result are the dialectics of voice (DVO), which incorporate and expands upon Senecah's conception of voice. As a *model*, my depiction of the DVO and TOV should be thought of as an *ideal type* rather than a representation of an actual thing or event. As Thagard (1984) points out,

Models [...] are like theories in being definitions of a kind of system, and so are in themselves neither true nor false. However, [...] we expect models to include

in the definition of a kind of system features which we would not attribute to real systems. (p. 80)

Models tidy up reality, so to speak. It is my hope that this model will clarify communication processes and tensions that are usually felt but mysterious for sustainability officers. That said, the specificity and stability suggested by the model should not be taken as a feature of the actual contexts and processes I studied. This model is an interpretation based upon my deep involvement in one case; the model will likely require adaptation and revision in different contexts.

⁵ Let me be clear: Participants in this study used *connecting* to describe personal, individualized opportunities for access and *publicizing* to describe mass communication/dissemination of information to general, heterogeneous audiences. Both activities can enhance stakeholders' sense of *access*.

⁶ As I discussed in Chapter 6, this is one reason that participants in this study sometimes conflated "persuasion" with "manipulation." I will not dwell upon this point in this chapter.

⁷ This first frame for voice is exemplified by the metaphors of IWU's Office of Sustainability as a "centralized hub" for activity and a "clearinghouse" for information. (These metaphors were pervasive in the data I collected and popular with participants in my study.) When participants characterized the OS in this way, they spoke of the organization as if it were a large and open space in which people buzzed about, fortuitously encountering one another and useful facts. The implicit message was that "anyone" could go to the OS in search of whatever they needed. Sustainability seemingly covers "everything," so the Office would strive to be of service to "everyone" as best as they could. And so, one constant goal associated with the hub and clearinghouse metaphors was to extend the reach and enlarge the expertise of the Office.

⁸ For example, OS staff members would occasionally tell administrators that they were "speaking for" the "sustainability movement" on campus. They were appropriate spokespersons to give voice to this group, they said, because members of the Office "sat down with as many people as possible," "have contacts across campus," "are thinking about the campus as a system," and so on. Conversely, OS staff members would sometimes claim that the Office was merely "one part" of the environmental voice of IWU initiated by, cultivated by, and responsive to *students* (or other stakeholder, as dictated by the situation). Many times, I sat in on conversations where the Office's partners insisted that "it's all about students" and that "education is our number-one mission" because "we are an institution of higher education, in the end." In this way, who/what is the center, face, or essential character of a voice can be adapted to the audience and situation.

⁹ Recall, for example, the fact that IWU's administrators claim to "put students first" and highly value "student leadership." Accordingly, sustainability advocates at the university would publicly credit students for their role in collaborative projects, encourage students

to speak at public events, and would take measures to make sure that they were “receptive/listening to” students. At the same time, however, the President remarked during several different meetings that he couldn’t lead the push for sustainability, “You have to ‘make’ me do it.” On some occasions, he singled out the fact that “the students” have to “want” IWU to prioritize sustainability. (These were meant to be invitations rather than threats.) Still, he was calling for a kind of “voice for sustainability” that many participants in this study thought had been proven by the successful campaign for a formal Office of Sustainability. The OS staff and I would later ask one another, “What, exactly, does the President want? Do we actually have some kind of ‘critical mass’ or ‘unified voice’ on the issues championed by the OS?” My point is that the voice(s) cultivated by the Office were never settled, clear-cut, or definitive.

CHAPTER 8

ETHICS

Introduction

In this chapter, I address study participants' claims about *communicating ethics*. As I discussed in Chapter 3 and elsewhere in this dissertation, sustainability is a value-relevant concept. Sustainability discourse may, but does not necessarily, feature messages about moral and immoral behavior, conceptions of truth and what is good for society, as well as descriptions of beauty and ugliness. People can and often do address questions about *how people might live rightly, justly, and/or virtuously in the world* when talking about sustainability. In this way, sustainability discourse is relevant to ethics.

As I refined this study's focus on lay theories of communication, I centered on *the problem of communicating ethics*.¹ During participant observation, I became aware that participants struggled with the place of ethics in communication about and advocacy for sustainability. In order to explore this further, I asked interviewees some variation on the question, "To what extent, if at all, should ethics feature in messages about sustainability from the Office of Sustainability?" The findings in this chapter derive principally from responses to that interview question and my field notes.

The central argument of this chapter is this: Participants' lay theories *limit the role or diminish the significance of ethics in advocacy for sustainability*. Put simply, participants are reluctant to express strong ethical positions on sustainability, especially

in explicit terms. They talk as if sustainability advocacy is (potentially) undermined or complicated by discussion of ethics. Thus, they argue for the minimization or compartmentalization of talk about ethics in sustainability-related communication. Ultimately, I show how participants' hesitancy about communicating ethics may blind them to the ethical problems involved with the Office of Sustainability's (OS) own sustainability advocacy.

This chapter has four remaining major sections. In the first section, I discuss the possible connections between sustainability and ethics, and I also explain further what I mean by *the limitation of ethics* in sustainability-related communication. In the second major section, I describe three interpretive repertoires (IRs) associated with participants' reluctance to foreground ethics: (1) the individual repertoire, (2) the conflict repertoire, and (3) the context repertoire. In the third section, I describe three broader patterns in participants' metacommunication that help to explain participants' concern about communicating ethics: (1) belief that communication ought to unify rather than divide, (2) a desire to be seen as reasonable, and (3) a preference for unobtrusive control or influence. In the closing section, I argue that these patterns may limit IWU sustainability advocates' ability to reflect critically on the ethics of their own choices regarding communication and persuasion.

Limiting Ethics: Defining Versus Advocating for Sustainability

Definitions of sustainability often contain explicit references to ethics. Most all definitions of the concept are *associated with* ethics, in that the reasons people give in support of sustainability often draw upon moral principles (e.g., fairness, kindness, temperance, justice, etc.). In fact, the most frequently cited definition of sustainability,

from the United Nations World Commission on Economic Development's (1987) *Our Common Future*, stresses intergenerational ethics. According to the report, sustainable development "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (United Nations, 1987, p. 43).²

Participants in this study echoed that and other ethical standards when defining sustainability explicitly during interviews. For example, one person told me, "The core idea is thinking of future generations. Leave the Earth in better shape than you found it, which you can't do because we have to consume things to live, but you can have that as your goal and be sensitive." Many interviewees characterized such goal-oriented behavior and sensitivity as "taking responsibility" or "being responsible." Some interviewees used more emotionally evocative language when defining sustainability. Take, for instance, the following statement defining sustainability in terms of justice, emotional connection, and communication:

In the human context, sustainability is also predicated on a fairly infinite sense of compassion and love. It's very important to recognize that economies are just ways that people live their lives and interact with nature. So, a sustainable economy is one in which resources are justly distributed [and] we don't in any way exhaust a limited resource. We regenerate it. Members of our own species are fed well [and] they have the opportunity to become contributing members in society. We also interact appropriately with all other organisms, as well. [...] There's a really strong element of justice; there are elements of cooperation [and] of collaboration.

For participants in this study, sustainability is a concept with rich, complex, and varied connections to ethics. Despite that, they were overwhelmingly cautious or concerned about featuring ethics in their communication about—and, specifically, advocacy for—sustainability.

I argue that participants limit or diminish ethics in their theories about advocacy for sustainability. They were reluctant to highlight ethics and ethicality as part of sustainability's significance and range of meaning, especially when dealing with people who were unenthusiastic about sustainability. This pattern allowed them to *define sustainability in ethical terms while treating ethics as a variable or dimension that can be set apart* from sustainability as needed. Thus, participants retained a sense of righteousness about their advocacy *while minimizing or obscuring the significance of ethics in their communication with others.*

Before I move on to a detailed analysis of this case, let me provide one example of participants' hesitancy regarding the communication of ethics. This exchange took place in an interview with a member of the Office's Steering Committee.

Interviewee: Maybe it's because of my ethical viewpoint, but sustainability [or] being sustainable is part of being ethical. So that's why I see it as being so high [meaning a significant element of or priority for the Office's work].

Interviewer: Should ethical appeals feature prominently in the Office of Sustainability staff members' interactions with others? Should it have to do with things being the right thing to do or the right way to live?

Interviewee: See, then you get into tricky morality issues, I think. Who's to tell me that my way of living is more [or less ethical]. And that's pretty tricky because you don't want anybody telling you that your morals are inconsistent with theirs and, therefore, wrong. I mean, these are all tricky issues.

While he clearly defines sustainability in ethical terms and believes ethics should be a priority for the OS, the interviewee equivocates when I ask him about *the communication of ethics*. He is less certain about *messages* and *interactions* than he is with logics or philosophies connecting sustainability and ethics. Communication about ethics deals with matters of right and wrong, what is desirable or undesirable, and so on; participants regularly treat this as a problem that is tricky, dangerous, or that requires significant care

and caution. Surprisingly, since they routinely define sustainability in terms of ethics, participants overwhelmingly *expressed reluctance or objection to the communication of ethics* in messages about sustainability.

Repertoires Limiting Ethics in Sustainability Advocacy

Participants made sense of this incongruity with three IRs.³ The first I have named *the individual repertoire*; what epitomizes this repertoire is the notion that ethics are a “personal choice” and therefore off-limits to persuasion. Second is *the conflict repertoire*, which is anchored by the assumption that discussion of ethics causes unnecessary discord. *The context repertoire* is third. This IR can be summed up by the assertions that there is a time and place for discussion of ethics and that sustainability advocates should be careful not to invoke or connote ethical issues when/where they are not already welcome.

The Individual Repertoire: “Ethics Are Personal”

The individual repertoire treats ethics as a so-called “personal choice.” This colloquialism implies that (1) persons who have considered all relevant factors and information (2) should be allowed to choose in an environment relatively free from influence. Additionally, the expression “personal choice” is often expressed in a way that implies persons have the right to others’ “respect” of their choice. Usually, this is a rhetorical device for legitimizing the choice or chooser, and it tends to shut down further discussion about people’s ethical decision making.

In some cases, the features of the individual repertoire were unmistakable in interviewee’s definitions of sustainability: “I guess [sustainability] would be a call to

personal responsibility and personal goal, a personal ethical choice.” In other cases, participants reinforced the notion that ethics are located primarily at the level of the individual with less certainty. Karen Adams talked to me about taking up “an ethic of responsibility” and being “an agent of change”:

I don't know whether or not this is a subjective or objective point. I don't know if it definitely should be one way or another. I can't say that. [...] It depends upon your perspective. I, as an individual, believe for myself that I have an ethical responsibility, but I don't think you have to have this notion of an ethical responsibility to change. [...] What I feel individually isn't necessarily what I think applies to everyone else, and I don't think you have to have any sort of understanding of any ethic to be motivated, to make a difference.

As she puts it, ethics are left up to individuals. Moreover, individual's sense of ethics “aren't necessarily what I think applies to everyone else.”

Facilitating discussions was “difficult” for one employee of the OS because sustainability is “really personal.” When I asked for an explanation, he responded:

Well, [it is connected to] people's ethics about how to live. You know: What's the best way to live a life? What brings happiness? What are our needs? What is harm? Those kind of questions [come up] when you [...] define sustainability in the first place.

Others shared the perspective (or assumption) that conversations closely associating sustainability with ethics are troublesome, since ethics are particular to individuals. As one interviewee told me, “It gets complicated with ethics because people see it very differently.” In light of these perceived complications and dangers of communicating ethics, a different interviewee said he would “keep it really simple,” if ethics were to figure at all into advocacy for sustainability. He said: “I think a sort of enlightened self-interest is part of all of this. But, where you draw the line is a bit tricky. But [I still define ethics as] doing something which helps somebody else, if you like, and doesn't obviously reward you.” His approach to this problem is interesting. On one hand, his

definition of ethics involves other-directed, relatively selfless behavior. Nevertheless, he couches this in terms of “enlightened self-interest.” Since “where you draw the line” between flatly self-serving and ethical behavior is difficult to do, he advocates “keeping it simple”—by which he means minimizing the discussion of ethics in advocacy for sustainability.

It should be apparent from the examples above that claims made in the individual repertoire do *not* necessarily treat ethics as an *exclusively* personal matter. Rather, this IR frames sustainability-related ethics *mostly* in terms of individuals’ dispositions, actions, and beliefs. Very often, the supposed personal nature of ethics meant that participants avoided associating sustainability with ethics in the first place. The other two IRs demonstrate the limitation of ethics in sustainability advocacy even more clearly.

The Conflict Repertoire: “Ethics Are Divisive”

The second repertoire treats ethics as something that invites disharmony into otherwise amiable, stable, or functional organizational relationships. Based upon that assessment, people employing the conflict repertoire usually suggest that communication about ethics undermines the goal of sustainable organizing. Take, for example, one interviewee’s recollection of the ceremony at which IWU’s President signed the Association of American College and University Presidents’ Climate

Commitment:

We went to that press conference and, you know, the ethical arguments are really resounding with me. But then, reading some of the letters to the editor, it just seems like people really take offense at that. And so, to me, maybe we do things in more subtle ways. Maybe we don’t throw this ethical stuff out [there] because we’ve got people saying, “Well, I don’t even believe in climate change.”

This interviewee identified as an environmentalist and was appreciative of the President's ethical appeals. Notice, though, *how she justifies* being “more subtle” by not highlighting “ethical stuff.” We ought to minimize appeals to ethics, she says, because some people do not believe *the facts or data* associated with climate change. At other points in the interview, she did promote “education” on factual elements of sustainability issues. Regardless, here she proposes mollifying naysayers who have factual concerns *by playing down ethics*.

While this may be logically inconsistent, it does demonstrate the degree to which some people expressed concern about ethics' volatility and divisiveness. As I will demonstrate more thoroughly later on, one interviewee told me that associating sustainability with ethics could be “dangerous” and “inflammatory.” Given that she was concerned about some kind of *conflagration*, she wondered aloud about how the OS and its partners might talk about sustainability in a way that “doesn't set people's hair on fire.” Other participants told me that ethically-loaded sustainability talk can “create enemies” and amounts to “stepping on toes.”

According to the logic of this repertoire, *deemphasizing* explicit verbalization and *emphasizing* nonverbal social cues can help sustainability promoters avoid the conflict supposedly inherent in conversations about ethics. This interviewee made such a claim using the example of promoting alternative transportation:

[Ethics is] part of the communication because each group of people will have different motivations to do something. But it can't be the only thing, especially in situations where there is a conflict [...] I mean there's no way you're going to tell them that cannot drive, [that] they should not drive because it's not the right thing to do. And if they keep seeing everyone else they know do that [i.e., seeking alternatives to single-person automobile use], they would just stop because they will get that conscience, I think. Some groups will.

If conflict is present or possible, ethics cannot “be the only thing.” She decries “telling” people not to drive and advocates making it more likely that they will “see everyone else they know” selecting alternatives to driving a personal vehicle. Her slide from *telling* to *seeing* is emblematic of participants’ tendency to denigrate straightforward verbal communication and endorse unobtrusive influence. In this instance, her preference for indirect, nonverbal communication stems from the theory that talk about ethics generates or exacerbates conflict.

The Context Repertoire: “Ethics Are Appropriate for Specific Situations and Audiences”

The last repertoire treats the communication of ethics as something appropriate only in certain contexts. We could think about this as *rhetorical sensitivity* or as the *compartmentalization* of ethics (see Cheney, Lair, Ritz, & Kendall, 2010, p. 42). In any case, the context repertoire treats ethics as something *appropriate to a limited number or range of* situations. The consequence of such claims is that sustainability advocates curtail ethics, which might otherwise be relevant to a great variety of conversations and issues.

Paul Abbey told me that he often avoids speaking about the connections between ethics and sustainability during meetings with IWU’s managers and administrators. It is easy for them to feel “drowned by just the sheer weight” of the *technical* problems associated with sustainability-related change, he said. Insisting on certain *definitions* of sustainability, especially those related to the concept’s ethical dimensions, may “pop the balloon.” Even still, notice how Abbey wrestles with whether or not the OS is an organization primarily concerned ethics, in the first place:

We kind of have this interesting balance. We're not an academic unit. We're trying to make a difference and start to adopt strategies to test and to work out on the campus. We want to keep that in mind. I think it's just an awareness that we don't always step back [and do broad ethical reflection]. I think the administration and I think some staff get a little impatient, especially when faculty and students start... I'm sure you've been in meetings where you've seen rolled eyes. The fastest way to kill a discussion is for somebody to ask for a definition of sustainability before we start the discussion.

Calling it an "interesting balance," the Director is saying that (1) it is not necessarily the primary or proper function of the OS to initiate ethical discussions about sustainability and (2) that ongoing discussions about the basic dimensions or definitions of sustainability may undermine the ability of the Office to collaborate with IWU employees and administrators.

Usually, participants framed this as a kind of accommodation of or strategic response to different audiences. According to the logic of the context repertoire, "sustainability work [...] is values-based [...] and] personal," but many people "don't have the patience to get deep," as one interviewee put it. If many people "don't want to have to discuss what's right," another interviewee wondered, "how do we have the discussion when it's appropriate?" Drawing on the work of Karl Weick (1979, 1995a), we can anticipate that people arrive at these questions and their answers *retrospectively*. That is, they will make sense of whether or not one context is appropriate for talk about sustainability's ethical dimensions *after the fact*, looking backward in order to project forward. This is evident in the following interview excerpt from a single two-minute period. Notice how the President's Sustainability Advisory Board (PSAB) member quoted below slides from distinctions based upon institutions and professions to distinctions based upon individual qualities:

Not everybody sees [sustainability] that as an ethical choice or a choice where ethics enters into the decision making process. So, certainly environmental justice and ethical behavior are ways that sustainability is brought to the forefront in churches. When you're in a group of economists, I don't know. Maybe it's the bottom line, it's the economic impact of the choices. I'm reading *Carbon Detox*, Marshall's [2007] book, and in it he says, "All that matters is the 'carbon bottom line.' If it doesn't reduce carbon then don't do it. If it increases carbon don't do it." [...] It's not because it's ethical. It's not because it's going to improve the economy. It should improve [the] "carbon bottom line." So does [an] ethical [frame] work for everybody? I suppose it doesn't. It matters who you're talking to and it matters what works for you. I'm not going to change my behavior if I don't believe that it's a problem. For me, it's an ethical problem—environmental justice and a livable future: that's an ethical issue from my perspective. An ethical issue will serve as a driver for me, a reason for me to change my behavior, my habits. And I have to come, myself, from a position of integrity because I know everything about me. And if I'm not true to myself in this it's hard for me to act in concurrence with anything that I don't believe.

Another interviewee also invoked both professional and personal distinctions when saying that ethics needed to be context appropriate. Describing the differences between engineers and education professionals, she claimed, "[We have] two different worlds here." She said that the OS needs to be "thinking of how to get people to really endorse these values and create them in a way that people can own them—so they're broad enough but they're also not going to shut people down."

This logical inconsistency in the context repertoire is, perhaps, one of the most significant reasons that it promotes the limitation of ethics: if ethics is communicated at all, it should be cast broadly "so that it would resonate with as many people across campus as possible" but in a way that individuals "own" the values associated with sustainability. These seeming incompatible demands provide little guidance or encouragement about how to articulate the intersections of ethics and sustainability. As a result, the participants in this study affirm the significance of ethics to one another but remain hesitant to feature ethics in their communication about sustainability to people

outside their network of advocates. Paul Abbey's reflection on this dilemma captures the Office's response nicely:

It's probably not our place to address [sustainability-related ethics] or at least to try and get other people to address it. But, I still firmly believe it has a place. I'm just not comfortable yet knowing where, how, when. I think we'll sort of muddle through as it goes along.

Summary

I have provided evidence of three repertoires used by participants in this study to limit, minimize, marginalize, or otherwise diminish ethics-related messages in communication about sustainability at IWU. In Chapter 4, I argued that people may invoke multiple IRs in a single statement. Above, I treated each of the repertoires separately. The following excerpt from an interview with a fundraising officer at IWU contains invocations of all three repertoires: individual, conflict, and context.

Interviewee: I think it's a really tough question. I guess [sustainability advocacy] would be a call to personal responsibility and personal goal, a personal ethical choice. But, even saying that viewing the choice as being an ethical choice one way or another—there's a part of that that feels kind of dangerous to me, because [it seems to be] “preaching” and, “Who are you to tell me what to do?” [...] In my mind, everything about it is that it's an ethics choice [...]

Interviewer: When you say it's “dangerous,” [do] you mean both that it might be ineffective and that it's...

Interviewee: Worse than ineffective. I don't think “ineffective” is nearly [as good a way to describe it] as dangerous as [is] “inflammatory.” [...] I mean there's business ethics things like, “Don't ever embezzle and don't abuse people and blah, blah, blah.” You know what I mean? I think there's some straight forward messaging but sustainability is a really, it's all about ethics but how do you, how do you, how do you get that messaging across without making it feel like you're preaching to somebody who doesn't want to be preached to?

Interviewer: Any ideas?

Interviewee: [...] I think it goes back to finding something that's emotionally resonant for the people you're talking to, the audience. [...] So, what do you tie to

the ethics message that gets, that doesn't set people's hair on fire? [...] I'm sure there's a lot of people whose hair would be on fire about a message around sustainability who are flying down to Chile or to Haiti to help with earthquake victims. It's not to say that people who aren't bought into sustainability as being a critical issue aren't [moral or ethical].

The interviewee connects with the individual repertoire when describing sustainability in terms of “personal responsibility” and “personal ethical choice.” She then invokes the conflict repertoire in her explanation that “calls to” sustainability may be “dangerous” and “inflammatory.” Her propositions for avoiding such a conflagration draw upon the third and final repertoire, the context repertoire: base messages about sustainability on “something that's emotionally resonant for [...] the audience” and “that doesn't set people's hair on fire.”

Taken together, these repertoires demonstrate the limitation or diminution of ethics when communicating sustainability. Participants' lay theories of sustainability advocacy rather consistently suggest that *ethics ought to feature minimally if at all in messages about sustainability*. Participants are reluctant to associate sustainability with ethics and ethicality when engaging in advocacy. Why? Because ethics are personal and unique to individuals, and those individuals have a right to be autonomous or make up their own mind, so to speak; because talk about ethics stirs the pot (to use a colloquial metaphor) and invites conflict where it might not otherwise exist; and because ethics some kinds and groups of people are more amenable to ethical appeals than others.

Three Broader Themes in Participants' Metacommunication

I would like to put the three IRs described above in context. Three patterns regarding sustainability organizing at IWU help explain participants' hesitancy with regard to ethics and sustainability: (1) unification, (2) reasonableness, and (3)

unobtrusive control. Following grounded theory methodology, I derived these three themes from field notes and interview transcripts. Taken together, these three patterns serve as a kind of “backdrop” that demonstrates the significance of the three IRs described above.

Unification

Over my time as a participant observer with the Office, participants increasingly stressed *unification* or *transcendent purpose* in the pursuit of sustainability. There are two senses of unification that I would like to discuss. One has more to do with technical or structural communication; the other has more to do with conflict and emotionality in communication.

Often, people spoke about unification in *technical* terms as an act of *system integration*. Sustainability, the reasoning goes, is possible only if an organization’s members “see the whole picture.” One interviewee from the OS Steering Committee told me, “The main challenge, in my mind, [is] this atmosphere is siloing.”⁴ Very frequently, OS staff and partners point to “bureaucratic silos” or people “fighting in their own little silo” as a principal obstacle to university-wide sustainability.

There are two claims implicit in this kind of talk. First, unsustainable activity stems from people not having necessary information. That information might be “all the facts,” evidence of the consequences of their actions and decisions, or a sense of how IWU operates as a complex whole. Second, the university would be more sustainable if viewed or designed more as an integrated, holistic system and/or less as a highly diversified organization managed at midlevel. One interviewee told me that the ultimate objective of the OS was to enable every member of IWU to “find anything and anyone”

related to sustainability. At a staff retreat in the summer of 2008, Robin Carson pointed out that the unified systems approach to sustainability and organizations can make work exasperating and exhausting for sustainability officers. Sustainability can be “the theory of everything,” she said, given its abstractness and how applicable it is to a variety of situations. Despite that concern, participants in this study persistently decried “siloeing” and “territorial thinking.” Moreover, as I showed in Chapter 6, they praised advocacy that amounted to “sharing data and showing information.” Usually, those data were used in the interest of representing IWU as a whole composed of interdependent parts—or, in more colloquial terms, systems thinking and *seeing the big picture*. So, sustainability advocates at IWU often spoke of unification as a kind of technical achievement. Participants worked to expand and intensify interactions between units within IWU. Furthermore, the participants wanted to make sustainability the master frame for those interactions and the information/knowledge they produced.

The second implicit claim about bureaucracy and systems thinkings was pervasive at IWU from the spring of 2008 onward. Remember that the Office was given probationary status for its first year, from summer 2007 to summer 2008. Administrators announced that the OS was to be a “permanent feature of the university” at an Earth Day press conference in 2008. Up to that point, viral metaphors were common in OS employees’ metacommunication. In a submission to a regional conference, they leaned heavily on Malcolm Gladwell’s (2000) social epidemics metaphor. This view of social change stresses its rapid, somewhat unpredictable occurrence once some tipping point is reached.⁵ Indeed, Snyder, Carson, and Valmer talked about their introductions to other operational units in IWU as “going around and infecting all these little spots” in the

university. Ultimately, however, sustainability officers at IWU came to stress social unification or harmonization in the pursuit of sustainability. After spring 2008, the push for sustainability was usually said to either (1) require that people transcend differences and potential conflicts or (2) result in a more unified and uplifted IWU. At this point, Office staff began to worry more frequently about “stepping on other people’s toes.” For example, take this interview statement from a consultant working with IWU:

One of the biggest things that we’re dealing with [... is] a bureaucratic institution and tailoring the message to somehow be functional within this bureaucracy and not step on toes. I think, when you’re dealing with IWU—you know, this long established institution—things have always been done like this, and you can somehow appeal to the institution and the way that it’s structured in a way that you’re not going to, um, piss anyone off. It’s the way, I think, the persuasion part of it comes in.

Persuasion “comes in” when advocates use communication to “be functional within this bureaucracy,” to “not step on toes,” and to “not piss anyone off.” The stress on unity and harmony is clear. This is how the consultant imagined the Office’s Director advocating sustainability to his superiors: ““These things are important and we need to consider this,’ and I guess sort of tailor it to that bureaucratic structure.” Notice the breadth and indeterminacy of her statement. Rather than promoting anything specific, the statement merely points out something’s significance for discussion. The take-away message, if you will, is that sustainability advocates should not aggravate others or upset the organization’s functioning too much, especially not by telling others what to do. “The bureaucracy,” as study participants’ sometimes used the term, frequently stood in for “just the way things are going to have to be” and what is “off limits” for change.

I want to emphasize that this second sense of unification is often expressed in an emotional or moral tone. The quotation below is an excerpt from a message that Lillian

Valmer sent to an OS email list and an excellent example of the second meaning of unification for sustainability advocates IWU. Valmer had by this time left IWU and the Office to pursue graduate education, but she continued to receive messages relevant to the OS's work on campus. In earlier messages to the list, faculty members and OS partners had expressed their worry that IWU's administrators were "pretending that everything is hunky-dory" and "probably soft-pedaling global warming." This is part of Valmer's response:

I would like to echo [Robin Carson's] concerns that whatever actions taken are carefully crafted in partnership with the IWU community. From my experience [... with the effort to create the OS], *what catalyzed change was the building of bridges and collectively crafting a productive way to move forward*. Although the barriers to institutional change are massive and at times seemingly unmovable, what it comes down to is taking creative approaches to reworking the way we live in the world. When we are trapped by the fear of our inability to create change, we spread panic rather than the hopeful message of change that we desperately need. Considering the current financial crisis, I urge you to be sensitive to the intense emotional state of things and *find ways to work as partners* in solving this climate change problem. We can find *strength in unity within these uncertain times*. Furthermore, I hope that we can move beyond crediting [the university's president] with all responsibility for the climate change dilemma and recognize that this is a societal shift we are demanding and moves far beyond the borders of IWU. He can be a *powerful partner and ally* in advancing sustainability work if we continue to grant him opportunities to do so. I would say that it is not so much of "having the power to stop him," but having the power to help him to do his job well and make the IWU a leader in best practices. (My emphasis)

This passage is representative of patterns that would come to predominate metacommunication at the OS. The OS staff had begun to speak of "*partnering*" more than "conducting pan-campus advocacy." They had started referring to their action in these partnerships as "*facilitating change*" more than "instigating new ideas" or "infecting" new recruits. One interviewee even likened his ideal form of sustainability advocacy to the process of consensus decision making employed by Quakers. In short,

sustainability became a term with which OS staff could express a (desire for a) sense of oneness across IWU.

What to make of all this? Kenneth Burke (1969a) says of unification: “It is a type of thinking capable of organizing mighty powers, as [people] materially in different worlds can be spiritually one” (p. 176).⁶ The quasi-spiritual sense of unification in sustainability rhetoric can be seen in Valmer’s statement in the previous paragraph. She speaks of “massive and at times seemingly unmovable” barriers, “reworking the way we live,” and not spreading “panic” because “we are trapped by the fear of our inability to create change.” Along the same lines, an interviewee from the Steering Committee told me that he is “a big proponent of not publicly criticizing others for their choices” because “[...] with criticism comes greater polarity.” For him and many others, unity was a transcendent value *and* goal.

So, a language of unification became prominent in sustainability-related advocacy at IWU. Participants spoke of unification as both a technical objective of sustainability organizing and a deeply emotional or moral sense about communication’s place in creating a sustainable IWU. Alliance and wholeness were stressed while the Office’s role as an influencer and campaigner of sorts was not. Since participants tended to regard ethics as personal and divisive, communication *of* ethics was sometimes treated as a threat to unity.

Being “Reasonable”

A second thematic element of metacommunication at the OS was being reasonable. Organization scholars have been “concerned [...] with how organizational control is accomplished through the self-positioning of employees within managerially

inspired discourses about work and organization with which they may become more or less identified and committed” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 620). That concern is warranted in the case I have examined.

I recall a discussion I had with Russell Snyder after Earth Day 2008. The Office was concluding its pilot year, and we were discussing what he anticipated for its future. Snyder told me, “What we need are reasonable people” in the Office’s transition to formal designation as an office within of IWU. Many of those involved in the start-up phase of the OS had been rather “strident” and “intense,” he said. A very active member of the PSAB and early supporter of the OS made a similar statement during our interview in 2010:

Interviewee: [Paul Abbey] always seems knowledgeable and he seems reasonable [...] Sometimes being passionate and being reasonable can seem in conflict when actually you’ve got to be sort of both. If you want to persuade somebody, they can’t think that you’re some kind of a loony.

Interviewer: What’s a loony? I mean, have you encountered somebody saying, “Oh, this person’s [a loony].”

Interviewee: I would say [being] dismissive of other points of view. So, you shouldn’t be dismissive of financial concerns, for example. That’s just crazy. That’s being loony. And there are some people in the environmental community who do that.

Interviewer: Oh, saying: “At any cost!” Right?

Interviewee: Yeah, and that’s actually not true. That’s grossly irresponsible. I would say you shouldn’t go around dissing the legislature too much, and that’s a very common thing. One shouldn’t go around making [anti-religious] statements, for example. It’s wrong, for one thing, and it’s counterproductive. [...] How many times have two armies gone to war praying to the same god? You know, everyone uses the same sort of language for their own ends: [...] “I think I am being reasonable because...” I think that happens as a normal part of language on both sides, both sides use it. Being “reasonable,” I guess, is a way of saying that you’ve got to look at the big picture. You’ve got to look at other sides of things, and then you should acknowledge them.

The interviewee calls two symbolic actions “loony.” One is “dissing” and otherwise disparaging groups with which you disagree. Another is “dismissing” other points of view. The distinction between dissing and dismissing is subtle but important. While being *disparaging* involves hostility toward other advocates, being *dismissive* involves not “looking at the other sides of things.” Reasonable sustainability advocates are not disparaging or dismissive because they look at the “big picture.”

This is troublesome for sustainability advocates who encounter others who are resistant to change, apply metrics that do not value organizational sustainability, or are hostile toward most things labeled “environmental.” For instance, participants regularly complained that program and project administrators demand short-term “payback” on environmental initiatives. That is, administrators often ask how quickly a sustainability-related technology will pay for itself without asking similar questions of artifacts not associated with improved environmental performance. Sustainability officers at IWU often say that such modes for pricing do not take into account the cost of decisions throughout the life of the thing purchased. For example, campus construction planning officials were concerned about the “green premium” (i.e., additional up-front cost of construction) of the resource efficient buildings promoted by the Office’s draft high performance building standard. OS employees pointed out to me that critics didn’t value the fact that so-called green buildings have been shown to be healthier places to work. As well, the critics failed to realize that very efficient buildings are cheaper because they cost less to heat, cool, maintain, and such over the life of the structure.

But how are “reasonable” sustainability advocates to respond? On the one hand, the participants critiqued such fiscal thinking as being unsustainable. On the other hand,

they would regularly tell one another that decision making based upon short-term fiscal considerations “is the way things work around here.” Still, they would insist, “We need a culture change” on matters such as this. Being reasonable frequently played out like this. Groups or people in power would employ unsustainable decision making premises or ideologies, but reasonable advocates would have to work/start with them “where they are.” Such strategic accommodation, participants told me, was part of culture change. This interviewee also refers to “seeing the big picture,” but she stresses *accommodation* more heavily than the fellow who worried that environmentalists might be seen as loonies:

I think that what can get dangerous is when [...people’s] message is too extreme. You lose too many people, especially in a university setting like this. “If we don’t do something right now,” you know, “our children aren’t” [going to have a future]. It has to be a broader message. Again, it has to have, maybe, a touch of financial impact. It has to have a touch of the environmental impact, but it can’t be this negative, dire message. I find that things are lost on a lot of people and they stop listening. “Oh, these crazy, radical hippies”—especially when you’re dealing with the business side of things. You know what I mean? I think there’s groups that that message is appealing to but—and I don’t think the Office does that—but I think they’ve maybe had to reign themselves back in at times. Obviously, they see this bigger picture and they all come from a certain set of beliefs, and you’re dealing with people who can be climate change deniers. And, you know, [you have] to try and somehow voice this and get people to listen to the message.

When this interviewee stresses that sustainability advocacy has to have “a touch of financial impact,” she means that persuasive appeals that challenge fundamental economic/fiscal premises—even those deemed unsustainable—must sometimes be accommodated, or at least that concessions should be made in order to facilitate short term successes.

Paul Abbey and I discussed this sort dissonance and disappointment. Abbey pointed out that partners with the Office are not always reliable or deeply committed to

the cause of sustainability. He then cited the work of Peter Senge and colleagues (Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, & Schley, 2008) and told me:

[Senge] just talks about—um, we just talk about—doing it humbly in the sense that we don't know the answers and whether or not these things will work. So, I think being comfortable with ambiguity is a huge requirement for the work because we don't see end results and we don't know if we're doing the right thing. We're doing our best. [...] It's kind of Zen-like in that sense of just letting go and letting people do their best in what they can do.

This “Zen-like” letting go is one feature of being a supposedly reasonable sustainability advocate. While this attitude may help foster dialogue and broad participation in sustainability initiatives at IWU (a formal goal of the Office), I believe it also presents a risk. Citing Jackall’s (1988) discussion of the problematic character of “being a good team player,” Alvesson and Willmott (2002) explain that workers can be dominated by “a network of meanings and guidelines for ‘getting by’ in ambiguous and politically charged social settings. They offer guidance on what is natural or necessary for corporate work to function” (p. 631). The slogan “be reasonable” serves just such a function for sustainability advocates at IWU. It is important that, most often, sustainability officers and OS volunteers tell/remind *one another (or themselves)* to be reasonable. Reasonableness seems all the more compelling because it appears to be an organic value of *our group*, as opposed to being imposed by others—such as administrators, antagonists, or people not associated with the university. Moreover, I can personally attest to the feeling of *relief* coupled with deciding to be reasonable (in this sense), especially when having a beer with other OS supporters to relax after a long day in which one’s persuasion seemed to fail.

A picture of “the reasonable person” emerged in my field notes and interviews. The reasonable sustainability advocate is even-tempered and respectful of others, does

not press for immediate action or sweeping change when doing so seems rather difficult or controversial, and is strategic in the “foundations” she/he decides to challenge. Put in terms of colloquialisms, we might say she/he plays nice, knows where the line is, and picks her/his battles wisely. Considered alongside the three IRs described above, this sense of reasonableness seems to radically limit the likelihood that ethics will be part of the discussion in *any* context.

Unobtrusive Control and/or Influence

Sustainability advocates at IWU also overwhelmingly favor unobtrusive means of influence. I use the term *influence* here because of the disapprobation of “control” so overwhelming in the directive repertoire. Nevertheless, participants in this study talk about “change making” and “facilitating change”—as opposed to persuasion, management, or control—in ways consistent with scholars’ description of unobtrusive *control* in organization studies. Indeed, participants’ implicit definition of control is largely associated with *obtrusive control*—persons in positions of bureaucratic authority exercising power directly, etc. Participants attempt to make *influence* palatable by stripping advocacy of its association with overt communication intended to persuade.

In particular, participants in this study favored *concertive* control:

In the concertive organization, the explicit written rules and regulations are largely replaced by the common understanding of values, objectives, and means of achievement, along with a deep appreciation for the organization’s ‘mission. [...] Members can be depended upon to act within a range of alternatives tied to implicit but highly motivating core values. (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985, p. 184)

In interviews and during fieldwork, I regularly heard claims like this: “I don’t think that telling someone to do something is necessarily going to, long-term, change their behavior or habits. I think you have to, like I’ve said, convince them that it was their

idea in the first place.” One way to do this, according to sustainability advocates, is to create culture change. Culture change is presumed to take place through “norming.”

Let me provide you an example of how sustainability advocates at IWU connect advocacy to norming and culture change—and, ultimately, concertive control. In Chapter 6, I quoted Lillian Valmer's assertion that a “good form of persuasion” is “constructive, positive [...] and] voluntary.” She responded this way when I asked her to elaborate:

Well, that's actually an interesting question, because when you look at changing behavior specifically, a lot of it has to do with creating social norms. People will voluntarily change their habits because everyone else is doing it. Sometimes. Like when you [walk into] and stand in an elevator and, sort of like the Candid Camera show, all the people in the elevator are facing the back wall. These people would walk into the elevator and realize that everyone is facing the wrong way. “Why are they doing that?” And some of them would be like, “All right, if this is the way we're doing it, I'll stand facing the wrong way.” They just sort of voluntarily change what they would understand as normal and regular because everyone else is doing that. As social marketers, in some sense, what we're trying to do is get people to reframe what they view as normal. And to sort of take some steps in a different direction. So are we being manipulative? Maybe. Most likely, I guess. But, we are we also providing other healthy alternatives [...] But it does need to be voluntary. Even though those guys are standing in that elevator, they're not telling the person to stand in the same direction. They're just modeling behavior. And there are certain prompts involved and it's sort of a behavioral deal. But you know, I think that that's an important distinction to make. [You might ...] see different people like some of the ones who stepped in the elevator and they're like, “You people are crazy!” And they faced the other direction and they're like, “I'm not doing it,” and that's cool. People need to have that option of saying, “I'm sorry, but I disagree with that. I'm not going to do it.”

Valmer's statement is an excellent illustration of the way in which sustainability advocates at IWU value behavior change and norming more than ostensible, discursive persuasion. They talk as if this is *an action upon the culture promotes voluntary change* (which is presumably better than “telling people what to do”).

Of course, this engenders tension about how to talk about and theorize influence and persuasiveness. In the example above, Valmer acknowledges the fact that sustainability advocates influence people with her statement about “being manipulative,” and the term manipulation implies unethical influence. However, she contrasts discursive persuasion—“telling the person to stand in the same direction”—with “sort of a behavioral deal” where advocates are “just modeling behavior.” The ethical tension inherent in persuasion *is resolved by the unobtrusiveness implied by the phrase “creating social norms.”*

Participants’ preference for unobtrusive influence/control stems largely from their reliance on *the language of community-based social marketing*. Several OS employees had attended a workshop held by Doug McKenzie-Mohr, a social psychologist well known for his development of community-based social marketing approaches to environmental problems (see, e.g., McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). During the Office’s pilot year, McKenzie-Mohr was invited to hold a multiday workshop on community-based social marketing. The event was recalled as a success even 2 years after it had taken place, and many volunteers (and certainly OS staff members) refer to “social marketing,” “CBSM,” and “what McKenzie-Mohr taught us” when describing the approach to sustainability advocacy at IWU. The application of community-based social marketing principles and methods to sustainability advocacy at IWU is by no means universal, consistent, or precise. However, it is an important source of the language of modeling, norming, and behavioral or cultural change that I critiqued above. Instead, I argue, the *language of community-based social marketing* has allowed

participants in this study to (1) justify concertive and other forms of unobtrusive control, and (2) resolve tensions they feel about communicating ethics.

I have two concerns. First, this pattern in participants' metacommunication does not appreciate the problem of *power* associated with unobtrusive control/influence. It is akin to the "noncommunication views of organizational power" critiqued by Mumby (2001). In fact, many scholars have commented upon the undemocratic, managerial, or unreflective character—of unobtrusive approaches to organizing (see, e.g., Deetz, 2005; Lukes, 1974; Mumby, 1997; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). This study's participants' metacommunication fails to take seriously the fact that organizations are "political sites where various organizational actors and groups struggle to 'fix' meaning in ways that will serve their particular interests" (Mumby, 2004). Calling change motivated by unobtrusive control/influence "voluntary" is questionable and at times surely disingenuous.

My second concern is more sympathetic to the perspective of the participants, if you will. Sustainability advocates' denigrate verbal and ostensible persuasive communication but promote establishing new social norms. This arrangement hinders their ability to conceptualize *how* such change is communicated person-to-person. Most of the participants in this study would concede that IWU is a roundly unsustainable organization and, moreover, that many people's behaviors in the service of that system are unsustainable. If this is generally true, sustainability—as a label for the system and individual actions within it—is anything but the norm. The language participants have developed to talk about advocacy does not explain how a small or marginalized group of

people modeling sustainable behavior end up convincing others to do the same, let alone how that might be achieved ethically. Take this interview statement, for example:

One of the things that we said we needed to influence was the culture of the campus as it relates to sustainability. Culture is very tough to measure, so it's almost just the way you feel about what things are going on. I believe that there has been significant shift in culture, and I think it will continue to shift. I think part of our mission is to educate the up-and-coming culture [i.e., students] to be more sustainable in their jobs and careers and lives after they leave the university. So, the fact that we have been able to get sustainable principles discussed in so many different genres [i.e., venues] around campus, to have projects like the self-funding energy projects and the recycling program taking hold as quickly as they have—I think that is a success of that shifting culture and endorsement that these things are important. The fact that we can make decisions and get support from campus administration to do things because, you know, it's not just financial sense, but it's good sustainable sense...

This statement uses culture as a metonym to describe a feeling about the status quo, a collection of principles, and even a specific generation or educational cohort. Change in culture is facilitated by what Cherim (2002) calls *confluence of continuity*, which is “established through the use of past labels and values and reframing these to include new applications required by the change” (p. 1134). Hence the interviewee’s statement, “it’s not just financial sense, but it’s good sustainable sense.” Still, the interviewee explains the place of communication in that innovation with a platitude: “we have been able to get sustainable principles discussed in so many different genres around campus.” Get it discussed, throw it out there, find people who already want to work with you, and model behavior. The stylized phrases used by participants hint at how change occurs but *obscure how communication is initiated and how it ought to be carried out.*

It remains the case that sustainability advocates at IWU employ lay theories that discourage communication patterns where the audiences to be persuaded *are obviously aware that the communicative relationship is primarily about influence.* This is because

participants' lay theories disparage persuasive *messages* (i.e., discursive action) but not extra-discursive influence. I argue that such an arrangement is ethically questionable, at best.

Summary

When participants discussed their own communication explicitly, they regularly supported unification as a transcendent goal, feared being seen as unreasonable, and promoted using unobtrusive means of control or influence. Since they promoted unification but theorized *ethics as personal and likely to spark conflict*, they routinely avoided or minimized the place of ethics in communication about sustainability. Though ethics was an important and thoroughgoing element of many participants' definitions of sustainability, they tried to appear reasonable by discussing ethics in only the most limited range of situations. In some cases, they were willing to avoid references to ethics entirely. Moreover, participants used the rather neutral, aseptic language of community-based social marketing to describe their influence and communication strategies—employing terms such as behavior change, norming, and showing alternatives. Unfortunately and surprisingly, they often said that these approaches, *which minimize explicit communication and obvious persuasion*, made any change realized more “voluntary” and “constructive.” By contrast, and as demonstrated earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 6, explicit or direct communication dealing with influence was negatively characterized as divisive, manipulative, or unduly directive.

The result is that ethics are rarely discussed at length or in depth with people outside of a small group of strident Office supporters. Ethical reasoning about sustainability is far less prominent in the OS' communication with others than is

economic/fiscal, scientific, technical, or pedagogical reasoning (i.e., sustainability is about cost saving and avoidance over the long term; sustainability is about understanding and complying with the laws of nature; sustainability is a technological and operational problem of efficiency; sustainability is an emerging domain of knowledge, and students should learn the most relevant facts and theories). More and more, the Office's staff members and partners wonder whether communication about ethics ought to be a significant part of their mission. With the *communication of ethics* largely absent from discussions of sustainability, they promote theories of sustainability advocacy that minimize conflict and diminish the value of *forthright, open, and transparent persuasion*. As such, study participants have, in many cases, made their influence less-than-obvious. Still, they claim that nonobvious influence and culture change provides more freedom and choice to the people they are influencing.

Epilogue

I am not convinced that this is a more constructive approach to influence and organizational change. In many cases, it misrepresents or obscures the Office's strategic use of people's most salient values and peer groups. Furthermore, it pushes from view potential conflicts and limitations of partnerships. Their focus is largely communicating in a way that *effectively generates compliance or change*, but their public accounts of this communication often lean on moral principles of communication transparency and equal standing. These incongruities persist, I argue, because of participants' hesitancy to discuss ethics when communicating sustainability.

Ethics need not be treated as something inimitably and exclusively personal, something set outside of the daily routines of work, or something acceptable in a limited

number of times and places (Cheney, et al., 2010). Surely, conversations about ethics can be difficult. I believe, however, that such difficulty can spark new approaches to shared problems, such as the problems related to organizational change for sustainability. Working alongside participants in the study, I also conceived of sustainability in deeply ethical terms. I am troubled by the degree to which that commitment remained tacit and the ways in which our communication strategies were justified. These patterns were due in part to our emergent lay theories about *the communication of ethics*. I was able to assess these thanks to the analytical distance and time for reflection provided by scholarly research. Most organizations' sustainability officers will not be afforded that luxury. In order to make "organizational sustainability" a robust concept and pursuit of organizational sustainability a defensible enterprise, I believe that sustainability officers must create opportunities to reflect openly and critically about the ethics *of* and *within* their communication theories and practices.

Notes

¹ By *problem*, I mean that “intrinsic to every practice are certain problems or dilemmas that affect the use of specific techniques” (Craig & Tracy, 1995, p. 253). Participants’ concern or hesitancy with respect to ethics affected their communication strategies.

² I am *not* saying that the definition of sustainability is settled or that the UN’s definition is universally praised. As I explored in greater detail elsewhere in this document, sustainability is a multifaceted environmentalist neologism. Clair (1993) points out, “When new terms are introduced into a language system (e.g., sexual harassment), their definitions must be contested before the language-users reach consensus about their denotative meaning” (p. 120). My arguments about the ethical content of definitions of sustainability and limitation of ethics in advocacy for sustainability were inspired by Clair’s exploration of denotative hesitancy in a study of sexual harassment discourse. Yes, various definitions of sustainability are still being developed, negotiated, and reconciled in society. However, participants in this study overwhelmingly defined sustainability (at least in part) in terms of ethical or ethics-related principles. We might say that most of the participants are not *denotatively hesitant*. Still, they tend to claim that sustainability advocates *not* prioritize ethics in their communication about sustainability.

³ My arguments in the first half of this chapter correlate with similar claims made by Cheney, et al. (2010, see pp. 42-47). They argued that three frames can limit ethics’ significance in our conversations and our lives: (1) essentialization, or reducing ethics to one thing; (2) abstraction, or putting ethics at arms length; and (3) compartmentalization, or putting ethics in a box. These three frames roughly correspond to the repertoires described below—that is, to the individual repertoire, conflict repertoire, and context repertoire, respectively. These comparisons are inexact, and I focus more on interpreting the data than making them fit the framework of Cheney, et al. Nevertheless, I want to emphasize the way in which their work grounds this part of my study vis-à-vis communication theory.

⁴ The word “siloining” is not a typo. It is the gerund form of the word silo (i.e., silo-ing). Participants routinely and frequently used this term to describe organizations with high degrees of work differentiation and specialization, which they treated as antithetical to the goal of sustainability.

⁵ Gladwell’s (2000) explanation of “the tipping point” and social epidemics is explicitly based upon a viral root metaphor (see p. 281). This metaphor, of course, is rather limited in its ability to account for communication as *symbolic* activity. Gladwell is effectively popularizing the literature on *diffusion* research, especially the work of Rogers (e.g., Rogers, 1962) on the diffusion of innovations and Granovetter (e.g., Granovetter & Soong, 1983) on diffusion thresholds.

⁶ This is the function of rhetoric with which Burke was principally concerned: its ability to create separation and congregation, to spark people’s spontaneous feeling of oneness

with or alienation from others. In a wry moment, Burke tells us that, “surely, the first prize for the vagaries and vagueness of identification must go to that tiny first-person plural pronoun, ‘we’” (Burke, 1973, p. 271).

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

Introduction and Overview

In this dissertation, I have investigated a specific case of sustainability organizing. I worked with, followed, and interviewed a wide range of people contributing to a university's new office of sustainability. Over the course of my fieldwork, I refined the study and chose to *focus on questions about communication, itself*. How did participants in the study think about, talk about, and experience the communication processes and problems inherent in their sustainability-related efforts?

Such questions led me to scholarship on *lay theory*, a concept with roots in psychology, sociology, communication studies, and other disciplines. However, I found that previous scholarly treatments of lay theory entailed assumptions that were not in keeping with my interpretive approach to research and criticism. In response, I developed a communication-oriented theoretical perspective on lay theory in Chapter 4. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, I incorporated that perspective when analyzing participants' lay theorizing of advocacy, the cultivation of voice, and communication ethics.

This project uniquely contributes to communication scholarship and has shortcomings. In the remainder of this brief concluding chapter, I discuss the lessons and limitations of this dissertation in the areas of theory, method, and practice.

Theory

This dissertation extends the discipline of communication studies' engagement in academic discussions of *lay theory*. Although I have demonstrated the utility of an explicitly interpretivist approach to the conceptualization and analysis of lay theories, the connections between lay theorizing, identity, and practice deserve to be more fully explored in future work.

Theoretical Lessons of This Study

I framed this study as an interpretive inquiry into organizing for sustainability (Putnam, 1983). In order to conceptualize lay theories and lay theorizing from an interpretive perspective, I drew upon a variety of sources to forge an approach suitable for my research questions and methods. Prior work in psychology and sociology treated lay theories as cognitive structures or properties of groups. Working from a communication-centered perspective, I treated lay theories as *types of claims that involve definition and conception of systems*. In particular, I used Thagard's (1984) definition of theory: "A theory is a definition of a kind of system, claimed to apply to real systems" (p. 82).

From this starting point, I differentiated lay theories from formal, scientific, or professional theories according to the means by which (groups of) people create, use, and assess knowledge claims. Where formal theories are drawn up and adjudicated by relatively defined groups in relatively established institutional structures, lay theories are generated ad hoc and in response to practical problems. Lay theorizing, I argued, is the structuration of interpretive repertoires, meaning that people develop flexible sets of

claims that they can draw upon as needed in order to invent explanations and predictions for the situations that they face.

I believe that this approach nicely fits Weick's (2004) call to think of organizing as people "acting thoughtfully or acting discursively, [so that scholars'] claims will have more resonance with the human condition to the extent that they grasp more fully the dynamic, transient [...] character of unfolding contextualized conversation (p. 411). I have demonstrated the way in which lay theory may be discussed vis-à-vis lay *theorizing*. This contribution shifts the discussion of lay theory from cognitive bases to communicative ones. Furthermore, while prior scholarship on lay theory sought to structure, model, and predict lay theory, the approach developed in this dissertation provides a means for the *interpretation* of lay theory, given that lay theorizing is a complex, situation-contingent, and symbolic activity. The analysis chapters demonstrate the utility of this approach to lay theorizing in a particular case.

I also reviewed extant scholarship on lay theory, itself, from an interpretivist's standpoint. I demonstrated that important work from three very different disciplines all drew upon three dialectics in their explanations of lay theory: the simplicity-complexity dialectic, the knowledge-knowing dialectic, and the implicitness-explicitness dialectic. This review and synthesis may provide the groundwork for multidisciplinary engagements with lay theory scholarship.

This study also provides important lessons about the conjunction of sustainability, communication, and organizing. As I described in Chapter 3, high-profile sustainability rhetoric draws upon and reinforces three themes: ecological foundations, crisis, and revolution. Taken together, these themes depict an unfolding drama in which

sustainability is a necessary response to the preeminent crisis of our times. As I noted in my discussion of the revolution trope, the change imagined in this rhetoric is sweeping but tempered, fundamental but not that disruptive. This is characteristic of popular arguments that apply sustainability rhetoric to organizations. As a very recent example, take Lazlo and Zhexembayeva's (2011) description of their approach to "embedded sustainability" as "a theory of strategy that enables a company to pursue profit with sustainability embedded at its very core" (p. 2). "The story of embedded sustainability," insist the authors, "is largely a positive and inspiring one" (p. 3). It is common for sustainability promoters to suggest that this sort of change is fundamental to organizations or should strike at their very core. In light of the findings of this dissertation, casting such change as sweeping or elemental is problematic. If we treat sustainability-related organizational change as an essential response to crisis, what is the consequence for *communication*?

Participants in this study shied from ostensible and forthright advocacy and they avoided invoking ethics in discussions of sustainability because they feared taking authority, initiating conflict, and undermining unity—not being "positive and inspiring," in Lazlo and Zhexembayeva's (2011) terms. On the whole, participants' lay theorizing of communication exhibited a broad pattern denigrating argumentation (in its formal sense), obvious attempts at persuasion, and direct discussion of difficult issues in communication. Their lay theories of communication positioned ideal advocates as *reasonable unity-seekers, leaders by example, and facilitators of others' ingenuity*.

They spoke of this kind of communication and advocacy as voluntary, open, and dialogic—riffing, in many ways, on the principles laid out in Habermas' (1984)

discussions of *communicative action*, meaning dialogic interaction aimed at mutual understanding. But Habermas casts communicative action as one of several types of social action. Communicative action may be compared against *strategic action*, which may involve either *concealed* or *open strategy*. I claim that, (1) as actors seeking organizational change, (2) the participants in this study *are* engaged in strategic action; (3) they account for their strategy in the language of communicative action although (4) the methods of influence they promote largely consist of indirect, nonobvious, or concealed strategic action. As I reflect on my experiences working with the Office, I recall struggling to put sustainability in terms compelling to target audiences and seeking to introduce the concept as “part of the dialogue” rather than as a rhetorical proposition. This disposition had a lot to do with our emergent preference that sustainability promotion on campus be diffuse and organic, rather than imposed by means of authoritative edict (even if we did commonly say that we wanted and needed “top-level” endorsement). I now believe that the patterns of lay theorization of communication in this case risk (but do not necessarily amount to) *systematically distorted communication*, according to Habermas’ model. By this, I mean that the knowledge claims about communication in this case promote concealed strategic action, though participants frequently refer to it in metacommunicative terms associated with communicative action.

This is a serious concern if (1) organizations are called upon to take sustainability to the heart of their identity and strategy, and (2) sustainability advocates’ genuine goal is social change through communicative action. After my participant observation and analysis, I remain convinced that the sustainability advocates at IWU

are committed to promoting mutual understanding, shared concern for sustainability, and broad participation in the university's change. Indeed, they invited a wide variety of participants into processes that lead to the production of strategic plans and official documents in many instances. What's more, some plans and documents authored by participants from across campus went through several rounds of public display, discussion, and revision. Still, the most prominent *lay theories* (as opposed to specific practices) at play in this case work against thinking about the Office of Sustainability's efforts in terms of the instrumentalism of openly strategic action. By design and necessity, the OS's communication involves instrumental and goal-oriented thinking and behavior. I do not believe, however, that the appropriate response is to cast concealed strategic action *as* communicative action.

Participants in this study desire productive and robust participation in debates and discussions of sustainability, and yet their lay theorization of communication elevates modes of interaction that work against that value. Theorists, business and civic leaders, and others who make claims about the necessary transformation of organizations through sustainability must also examine their assumptions about *communication's role in the manifestation of sustainability within and across organizations*. Sustainability remains a contested and shifting ideal, and thus it deserves critical attention in each of its manifestations. How communication is treated in the course of advocacy for sustainability ought to be of paramount concern to environmentalists and other organizational change agents. Lay theories of communication might not only undermine sustainability advocates' effectiveness, they may raise questions of communication ethics in the pursuit of an otherwise worthy goal,

as well. Our theories of organizational sustainability should be responsive to this concern.

Theoretical Limitations of This Study

This study is not without its limitations. There are at least three theory-related areas in which others and I might extend or challenge the lessons of this study.

First, while I have shown how we might conceptualize lay theorizing as *building up* and *drawing from* repertoires of knowledge claims, I did not apply the second major element of my literature review to the later chapters of this dissertation. In Chapter 4, I provided an interpretive review of scholarly perspectives on lay theory from several different disciplines. I argued that those perspectives each ascribed three dialectics to lay theories and the process of lay theorizing—the simplicity-complexity, implicitness-explicitness, and knowledge-knowing dialectics. I suggested that this knowledge might contribute to the growing body of work that discusses how people communicate in order to “accomplish knowledge” (see Kuhn & Jackson, 2008). This review is useful, I believe, but I have not fully applied it within this dissertation in order to maintain the cogency of the analysis chapters. It is my intention to explore practical applications of this review in future projects.

Second, this dissertation project has focused primarily on *discourse* and less on extra-discursive *practices*. Chapter 7, in which I discussed the cultivation of voice, addressed practices more than any other element of this dissertation. Nonetheless, I gave my attention more to participants’ language and knowledge *claims* than to their action routines, bodily performances, and the like. In Fairclough’s (1992) terms, I concentrated on the level of *discursive practice* more than *social practice*. In Chapter 4, I established

that this study would address lay theory in terms of discourse, rhetoric, and other forms of language in use. Of course, *communication* is a concept that extends beyond language; future research could continue the line of research established in this dissertation by considering the consequence of practice more thoroughly. Geiger (2009) has already outlined the potential of such an endeavor for organization studies scholars. In communication studies, the concept of *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) may have some traction and offer a way to extend the perspective on lay theorizing that I developed in this project (see, e.g., Iverson & McPhee, 2002).

Third and finally, I have not discussed *identity* in great depth in this study. The issue of identity certainly was relevant to participants' experience. Take, for example, this interviewee's statement:

I need to come up with the perfect word for environmentalist. Like: I'm just a caring person. When someone says, "Oh she's an environmentalist. She composts," [I want to respond] "Okay or [maybe] I'm just somebody who cares about how clean my environment is." You know, *environmentalist* now has this negative connotation; it's someone who's kind of crazy and loves trees more than people. [...] I wouldn't want to be described as that.

She and I talked a while about her ambivalence about "being an environmentalist," which presented her with personal *and* rhetorical conundrums. In Chapters 3 and 6, I discussed participants' uncertainty about *activist* identity, and elsewhere I mentioned that many participants were uncertain as to whether the Office of Sustainability was (or ought to be) part of larger environmental social movements—as opposed to simply being part of a change process currently "trendy" at universities. Despite that, I opted not to wade much into issues of identity in this study. I believe it may be fruitful for others to address matters of identity more fully in future studies of sustainability organizing.

In this dissertation I have developed and applied an approach to lay theory and theorizing. I explored participants' claims about and experiences of advocacy, voice organizing, and ethics. In the future, scholars may productively extend or challenge this study by employing the framework I developed to talk about extant lay theory scholarship, studying extra-discursive practice, and addressing issues of identity head-on.

Method

This was an in-depth case study of the role of communication and metacommunication in the development of an office of sustainability at a large university. My methodological choices had advantages and limitations.

Methodological Lessons of This Study

For this study, I engaged in long-term ethnographic participant observation, qualitative interviewing both in group and individual formats, and some textual analysis. Employing these various data gathering methods provided me with a rich and varied cache of material to interpret and critique. It allowed me to act as a “professional stranger” (Agar, 1996), simultaneously sympathetic to *and* analytically curious about the people who participated in the study. This unique position enabled me to think about lay theory as something more than the property of individual's minds or a single group's communication patterns. Instead, my long and complex research relationship with the Office of Sustainability (OS) allowed me to recognize the adaptable and sometimes inconsistent ways in which participants' made knowledge claims. My time in the field attuned me to certain patterns, keywords, and the like. Later, reviewing interview data, I was able to reconstruct interpretive repertoires “available to” most any of the

participants. Earlier treatments of lay theory (and related concepts) had treated lay theories as relatively consistent features of individuals and groups. That is, that work implied that individuals *have certain* lay theories or groups are distinguished by the *theories they use*. In the analysis chapters, I've shown a number of examples where *one* interviewee fuses or switches between different repertoires. I do not believe that I would have been as likely to make this observation had I relied exclusively on interviews and had I *not* worked alongside Office staff members and volunteers, sharing in their struggle to make sense of the changing place of the OS within IWU.

Methodological Limitations of This Study

At least two limitations are connected to this study's methodology. First, there is the matter of what we might call *critical distance*. In Chapters 4 and 5, I mentioned that critique and critical theory took a less prominent role than interpretation and interpretivist epistemology in this study. As I discussed in Chapter 3, sustainability is an idea with historical, economic, and ideological implications. For that reason, it deserves serious critical attention, as do the practices of people who act as its advocates. I was in a unique position to study a group of people working with an emerging organization. Moreover, offices of sustainability are a new *kind* of organizational unit. I prioritized interpretation in order to *make sense* of study participants' lay theories of communication and organizing, but it is just as important to critique the patterns that emerged. My partnership with and personal affection for many of the participants may have limited my willingness or ability to thoroughly critique their habits of speech and action. I have attempted to provide a modicum of critique, which is demonstrated best in Chapters 6 and 8. Still, future research might more fully illuminate the various

dimensions of sustainability organizing by employing a stronger orientation toward critical inquiry.

Second, I cannot make any strong claims about lay theorizing and *causation*. Throughout this document, I've used terms such as flexible, adaptable, varying, and changing. This is in keeping with my interpretivist approach to research, but it limits my ability to talk about definitive or predictable relationships between lay theorizing and unique characteristics of the participants. I *cannot* say, for example, that people employing the directive repertoire for advocacy are more likely to “do X.” Scholars more adept at gathering and analyzing quantitative data from post-positivist points of view might be able to challenge and extend the approach to lay theory that I have established and applied in this study.

Practice

Finally, this study has implications for practitioners—that is, people who do sustainability advocacy and organizing each day.

Practical Lessons of This Study

I have endeavored to make this study practical both in specific and more general ways. The dialectics of voice organizing presented in Chapter 7 are an example of a specific contribution to practice. Senecah (2004) intended her theory of the trinity of voice to be relevant to the work of environmental communication professionals; I have endeavored to give her work *a process dimension*. I believe that the tensions accounted for in the model will be recognizable to many people tasked with “organizing for sustainability.” As a *model*, I hope that my work will clarify the challenges for

practitioners and professionals working in the area of organizational sustainability. I believe that having a tool of sorts for perceiving these challenges can stimulate creative and critical reflection, and ultimately improve communication's functionality and ethicality.

More broadly, I believe that this study outlines the significance of *communication* in processes of sustainability-related organizational change. Communication is not simply the means by which we transmit information about the "facts of the matter." Instead, it is the very stuff from which we create and negotiate relationships and organizational arrangements. It is the means by which we forge sense out of very complex and difficult change processes. For example, I have shown that people *do not simply advocate for* sustainability. Instead, they also struggle with how to talk and think about advocacy, itself.

In a very recent article, Lyon and Mirivel (2011) claim that, "In fact, communication researchers know little about the communication concepts laypersons and professionals draw on, the nature of communication training in organizations, or whether communication research is used ethically" (p. 54). In this study, I have attempted to create and apply a framework for investigating practitioners' lay theories of communication. In Chapter 8, for example, I specifically addressed participants' approach to the communication of ethics and commented upon the consequences of their appropriation of community-based social marketing theories. In these ways, I hope to advance the scholarly conversation about metacommunication *in practice*. Ultimately, this may be translated into materials for dialogue or training on how laypersons may engage communication *about* communication.

Consider, for instance, that there are a number of new frameworks and systems to track and account for sustainability in organizations. In the domain of higher education, the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education's Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System (STARS) will likely become the standard. STARS documents and rates colleges' and universities' efforts in (1) education and research; (2) operations; (3) planning, administration, and engagement; (4) innovation. While the dimension of innovation covers "creative and innovative strategies implemented on campuses" (Association for the Advancement, n.d., p. 13), none of the basic dimensions assessed deals with communication directly, let alone communication as symbolic interaction. This is not surprising, since STARS is described principally as a measurement system that identifies and accounts for specific *metrics*. After all, there is still quite a lot of uncertainty and ambiguity about what sustainability is and should mean for organizations, so dealing with it in the language of accountancy and auditing affords STARS participants some sense of clarity, objectivity, and mastery.

Nevertheless, the analysis I provided in this study showed the way in which sustainability advocates at one university struggled to understand and craft knowledge of their *communication of, about, and for sustainability*. The participants demonstrated broad distaste for up-front advocacy and ostensible persuasion, utilized an unwieldy constellation of terms to talk about the development of voice for environmental issues on campus, and marginalized the discussion of ethics in their talk about sustainability. I have provided an *interpretation* of the problematics of communication and lay theorizing about communication, if you will, for one group of sustainability advocates.

Given my interpretation, I believe that future applied scholarship should consider how to more thoroughly integrate discussions and assessments *of communication* into programs promoting organizational sustainability. I do not mean that certain theories or strategies of communication ought to be ranked and rated. Rather, my study suggests that it may be valuable to fold discussions and lessons about communication as symbolic interaction into more formal and institutionalized planning processes and action strategies associated with organizational sustainability.

Practical Limitations of This Study

It should be obvious, I think, that the practical applicability of this study is limited by the fact that it deals with *metacommunication*. Communication, symbolic interaction, and such are things that laypersons regularly take for granted, so the same is likely true for communication *about* communication. The discussions in this study are at a second step removed from many people's everyday experience of communication, if you will. Teachers of all kinds will have to be careful and creative when translating this work to students for practical purposes; it will likely be unusually difficult to teach about metacommunication in ways that do not rely upon common and unproductive assumptions about communication.

Conclusion

This dissertation has employed and contributed to communication theory, methodology, and practice in various ways. While this study has limitations, I am optimistic that, in our future work, other communication scholars and I can address the questions I have not answered and explore the issues I have not addressed.

Lay theory and theorizing is an area of human experience that multiple disciplines can explain and enliven. As such, it presents an opportunity for communication scholars to engage researchers in other disciplines and for us all to develop scholarship on genuinely interdisciplinary interests. I hope that this study will promote conversation between communication-oriented researchers and others fascinated by lay theorizing.

Sustainability is an important concept with an uncertain future. Is it merely a fad, a passing social obsession? Is it simply a form of retrenchment and reproduction of the dominant interests of our time? Might it be part of an emergent, different way of making sense of human beings' relationships with one another and our collective relationship to the rest of the world? Surely, the answer involves some of each of those three possibilities. In any case, it is important for us to understand how people put sustainability into practice in various contexts. This study provided an in-depth look at communication and sustainability in one case. I look forward to publishing from this study in various formats, putting my arguments and observations into conversation with the work of other scholars interested in the problem of sustainability.

In the end, I hope that this study speaks to people's desire to better understand themselves, to work together productively and ethically, and to live in a responsible and uplifting manner. Perhaps, in a small way, reflection on the persistent problems of communication and sustainability can serve that purpose.

APPENDIX A

DOCUMENTATION OF INFORMED CONSENT

Consent Document: Ethnographic Observation

Background

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether or not you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully. Ask me questions if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The purpose of this research project is to study the concept of sustainability as it relates to organizations and communication about change. I am doing this study as a part of my doctoral program in the Department of Communication at [Intermountain West University]. Additionally, I am conducting this study to provide information to the Office of Sustainability (“the Office”) and to better understand how people change organizations and talk about environmental issues, specifically “sustainability.” [Russell Snyder], the Interim Director of the Office, is designated as Internal Co-Investigator for this study. While he will not document his observations, he and other Office staff will work with me to change office policy and activity based upon research findings, and they may co-author publications with me based upon research findings.

This research project is intended to study both organizational and environmental communication. By organizational communication, I refer to patterns of interaction between members of an organization and between the organization and its various constituencies. By environmental communication, I mean messages that deal directly with environmental concerns and issues. In this study, I am interested in how the University coordinates efforts toward environmental sustainability, and, specifically, the role of the Office of Sustainability in that process. With respect to environmental communication, I am interested in how people working collaboratively define sustainability and identify environmental/ecological problems or issues. I hope to understand how the Office can play a more effective role in promoting sustainability on campus. On a broader level, I hope to understand how complex organizations like the University set and try to reach goals for being more sustainable.

Study Procedure

I am conducting observations of the [IWU] Office of Sustainability and its connections to the campus and community. These observations will involve the work of the Office and a range of people, including members of other organizations. As Principal Investigator, I will conduct and document my observations of messages, interactions, gatherings, and events. You are considered a potential participant because of your connection with the Office.

My observations will most often be recorded as handwritten notes and turned into detailed descriptions later. I will use these notes and descriptions to find patterns in communication about things such as ecological sustainability, organizational change, and organizational structure. Office of Sustainability staff will periodically be involved in reviewing research data. Meetings between Office staff and me will involve reflection on research data, including descriptions of my observations. These descriptions will have specific identifying information removed (e.g., names), but you may still be identifiable to Office staff who review research summaries. Based upon our meetings, Office staff may make changes in the Office's work and structure. This means that observations I record may be involved the decisions made and actions taken by the Office. Data may also be used in my dissertation, which I will author alone, and in other publications, which may be co-authored with Office staff.

Risks

There are minimal risks to you in this study. Despite the precautions to be taken, such as the removal of identifying information in publications, participants may lose confidentiality. People reading edited data or publications may still be able to identify you.

Additionally, [Russell Snyder] is identified as the Co-Investigator on this study. [Snyder] is also the Interim Director of the Office of Sustainability. He has been given the title of Co-Investigator because he and other Office staff will be actively involved in reviewing observations and other data collected for this study. Because he and other Office staff will be involved in the research study more than most observed participants, you may feel discomfort. You may also feel discomfort being observed at all. Participation in this study is your decision. You may contact the Principal Investigator, Co-Investigator, or Institutional Review Board with any questions or concerns. Contact information is provided below.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study. However, we hope the information we get from this study may help develop a greater understanding of environmental issues and organizational change in the future. Research data will be shared with the Office of Sustainability for its development.

Confidentiality

In reports based upon observations and other data, steps will be taken to maintain your confidentiality. Handwritten notes will be stored in a locked cabinet in my workspace, and digital notes will be kept on a password protected computer in digital form. Your name will be omitted or a code name will be used in detailed notes not taken at the time of observation. Information that might identify you will be removed from publications produced using data from this study.

Office staff will discuss research data with me, the Principal Investigator, on a regular basis. We will shape the study process together. Office staff will also often be present while I make observations or participate in activities. Given that, Office staff may be able to identify you in research data in which your name or other identifying information has been removed.

You may choose to not participate in this study. Not completing this form signals your choice to not participate. You may also file a formal notice of refusal with the Principal Investigator, for him to keep with other study records. If you choose to not participate, I will not document observations of your interactions with the office. If you consent to participate in this study by signing this form, you may withdraw your consent at a later date. Please notify the Principal Investigator in person or in writing if you wish to withdraw consent at a later date. I will stop collecting research observations of your interaction with the Office of Sustainability at the time you withdraw consent, should you choose to do so.

Person to Contact

If you have questions, complaints, or concerns about this study, you can contact Brenden Kendall, Principal Investigator and a doctoral student with the University of Utah Department of Communication, [*contact information removed*]. You may contact the Co-Investigator and Interim Director of the [IWU] Office of Sustainability, [Russell Snyder, *contact information removed*].

Institutional Review Board

Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints, or concerns which you do not feel you can discuss with the Investigators. [*Contact information removed.*]

Voluntary Participation

Participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may discontinue participation at any time without any penalty or loss to benefits. This will not affect your relationship with the Investigators.

Costs and Compensation to Participants

It will cost you nothing to participate in this study. You will not be compensated for participation.

Consent

By signing this consent form, I confirm I have read the information in this consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I will be given a signed copy of this consent form, if requested. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Researcher

Signature of Researcher

Date

Consent Document: InterviewsBackground

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time you need to read the following information carefully. If there is anything that is unclear or incomplete, please speak with the researcher, Brenden Kendall, in person or via email [*contact information removed*].

The purpose of this study is to understand how people involved in environmental organizing think about and engage in communication. In particular, this study investigates how people link (or don't) particular kinds of communication and organizational change.

The interview data from this study complements Brenden Kendall's past observational research on the Office of Sustainability at [Intermountain West University] ("the Office" and "the University"). This study is part of his doctoral dissertation for the University of Utah Department of Communication. Whether or not you were part of those recent observations, the study covered by this consent form is designed to ask you and others questions about sustainability, communication, and your experience with/in the Office.

Study Procedure

You are being asked to participate in one or both of two types of interviews: an individual interview and/or a group interview. Individual interviews will involve you and Brenden Kendall. These interviews will be conducted in a private place suggested by Kendall or a location you select. Group interviews, also commonly called focus groups, will involve

you, several other people, and the researcher. Group interviews will be conducted in private meeting spaces.

Individual interviews are anticipated to last between 30 minutes and two hours. Focus groups will be scheduled for 2.5 hours, with approximately 2 hours planned for interaction and the remaining time devoted to preparation, breaks, and such.

Questions will address several topics, including: (1) your work, student, or volunteer roles at [IWU]; (2) the concept of sustainability; (3) change in organizations and society; and (4) communication—all with reference to the [IWU's] Office of Sustainability. In focus group sessions, you will be asked to interact with others based upon prompts related to these topics. These interviews will be “moderately structured,” meaning that there will be questions that are common to all of the interviews, though the actual content of discussion can be guided in real time by you, other participants (in the case of group interviews), and the researcher. With your approval, the individual interviews will be audio recorded; group sessions will be audio recorded with the consent of all participants.

Risks

The risks of this study are minimal. There are, however, a few you should be aware of.

First, [...] it is possible that others will be able to identify you or your responses, despite the measures taken to keep your responses confidential. You will likely know some of the other participants in the group sessions, and may (eventually) work with them on projects that are related to the Office of Sustainability's mission but not to this study.

Your name and the names of people you discuss will be in interview transcripts. However, only the researcher, his research advisors, and a transcriptionist will have access to recordings and unaltered transcripts. “Raw” interview data (e.g., recordings, transcripts, notes) will *not* be shared with Office staff/volunteers/partners and other [IWU] stakeholders. Also, your name will be changed in presentations and publications based upon the research. Still, contextual information you provide during the interview may be identifiable to others if that information is used in publications. Following the completion of the study, the researcher plans to provide presentations to Office stakeholders; those sessions may also be open to the public. Measures taken to accord you confidentiality are described in greater detail later in this document.

Second, you may feel upset thinking or talking about personal experiences related to sustainability communication at [IWU]. This minimal risk is similar to the experience of discussing personal information with others. The researcher will ask you probing questions and will challenge assertions. As well, the researcher will ask you about emotions you have experienced in your work related to environmental issues. If you feel upset from this experience, you can tell the researcher. Contact information for the office for human research subjects' protection is provided below.

Benefits

We cannot promise you any direct benefit for taking part in this study. You will not be compensated for participation. However, the researcher hopes that the information gathered for this study will help develop greater understanding of sustainability advocacy and organizing. Lessons from this study may inform others' work for organizational change. Additionally, the researcher will discuss the implications of this study with the employees and partners of the [IWU] Office of Sustainability in the future. Despite this, it is not certain that your participation in this study will benefit to you, the Office, or others.

Alternative Procedures

If you are unable or unwilling to participate in a face-to-face interview, a phone or computer-mediated interview can be arranged.

Confidentiality

Your data will be kept confidential. As described above, it may still be possible for others to identify you or your answers from individual interviews. This section describes the measures taken to protect your confidentiality.

Your name and personal/identifying information, as well as that of other persons mentioned during interviews *will be preserved* in recordings and transcriptions (i.e., your data). "Raw" data *will not be shared* with Office staff members or affiliates. No other University stakeholder will be provided full or unaltered data files, except members of the researcher's doctoral committee or research team.

Paper copies of data and records will be stored in a secure filing cabinet in the researcher's workspace. Digital copies of data will be stored on the researcher's password-protected computer or in protected folders on data storage devices. The researcher will keep the audio recordings of all interviews for one year after the completion of his dissertation. At that time, he will erase/delete every audio file from all storage devices and services.

We will do everything possible to keep information you share while participating in a focus group from those not associated with this project. Thus, we ask you and the other participants to keep the focus group discussion confidential. Still, there is a chance that a group member might mention your comments or name in a later conversation. Consequently, we cannot guarantee that no one will share what you have said after they leave.

The transcriptionist will not be located in [this region] and will not have any direct stake in the work of the Office of Sustainability. The transcriptionist will sign an agreement to protect your privacy and keep data confidential; that form can be provided to you upon request. Recordings and transcripts of interviews will be transmitted via password-protected file sharing programs on the Internet. The means of transmission will not be controlled or hosted by the [IWU]. Data available to the researcher and transcriptionist online will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

In publications based on this study, your name will be removed or changed. Contextual and personal information may also be altered or omitted to prevent identification. In publications, the researcher will provide as little personal or potentially identifying information as is reasonable to provide an accurate, rich account of the topics being studied.

Person to Contact

If you have questions, complaints, or concerns about this study, or if you think you may have been harmed from being in the study, you can contact Brenden Kendall at [*contact information removed*]. Kendall can be reached at this number 24 hours a day.

Institutional Review Board: Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns that you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at irb@hsc.utah.edu.

Research Participant Advocate: You may also contact the Research Participant Advocate (RPA) by phone at (801) 581-3803 or by email at participant.advocate@hsc.utah.edu.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from this research will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Additionally, you may refuse to answer any question during the interview or terminate the interview at any time. Your decision to participate, not participate, or withdraw from participation will not affect your relationship with the researcher.

Costs and Compensation to Participants

Participation in this study will not cost you anything. During group interview sessions, light refreshments may be made available by the researcher. Beyond that, you will not be compensated in any way for your participation in this study.

Statement of Consent

By signing this consent form, I confirm I have read the information in this consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I will be given a signed copy of this consent form, if requested. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Researcher

Signature of Researcher

Date

APPENDIX B

TEMPLATE RECRUITMENT STATEMENT

I am Brenden Kendall, a doctoral candidate in the University of Utah Department of Communication, and I'm conducting a study of the [IWU] Office of Sustainability. To supplement my observational research, I am now conducting interviews with people who have worked/volunteered/partnered with the Office of Sustainability. I am talking with people in both one-on-one and group interview sessions. You are invited to participate in either type or both types of interviews.

Whether you've been involved from the beginning or have been involved only recently, I'm interested in talking to you! Whether you think of yourself as an expert or not, I'm interested in talking to you! Regardless of your campus roles—student, staff, faculty, administrator, etc.—I'm interested in talking with you! I plan to conduct these interviews as soon as possible, beginning in February and continuing through April 2010. Individual interviews will last between 30 minutes and two hours, depending upon our conversation and your schedule. Group interview sessions will be scheduled soon and will last two hours. Interviews will be held in a private meeting space on [IWU's] campus or at a location that you choose.

These interviews are not hosted or sponsored by the [IWU] Office of Sustainability. I will not share “raw” interview data with Office staff or associates. However, I will present summaries of my research with Office stakeholders at the conclusion of the study. If desired, you will be given a written summary or be welcome at presentations at the end of the study.

You can review the document that explains in greater detail what your participation would involve. I hope that you are interested in participating in this study. If so, please reach me at any time by email or phone. I can be reached at any time, and am able to schedule interviews whenever is best for you.

[Contact information removed.]

Thank you very much for considering participating in this important study of sustainability, organizing, and communication.

Brenden Kendall
Doctoral Candidate and Steffensen Cannon Research Fellow
University of Utah Department of Communication

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Individual Interviews

I'd like to begin by briefly discussing your work at the University.

- What position or positions do you hold within the University?
- Please describe your primary duties for me.
- How did you get involved with the Office of Sustainability?
- Please describe more specifically your role in or your relationship to the OS.

Let's focus on the goal of sustainability for a moment.

- The term “sustainability” means different things to different people. What does sustainability mean to you?
- What do you see as the most promising avenues to sustainability in our community?
- How does this vision of sustainability apply to your work at the University? Can you give me a specific example or illustration?

I'd like to talk to you about change, within society but also inside organizations.

- From your standpoint, what kinds of *societal* change does the pursuit of sustainability involve, if any?
- What in your view are the *first steps* necessary for such changes to occur?
- What obstacles do you see to such changes?
- What does that kind of change have to do with the University *as an organization*?
- What part can the OS have in bringing about these changes at the University and beyond?

Now I'd like to talk to you specifically about communication types and patterns.

- What types of communication are needed to facilitate change and bring about a greater commitment to sustainability?
- What are the best ways in which the OS can network or create relationships within and beyond the University?
- Are there specific types of messages or communication patterns that can make the greatest difference in this effort? Please be specific.
- Are there specific types of messages or communication patterns that have failed or won't work in this effort?
- Are there types of communication that are special to your idea of “the sustainable organization”? If so, please explain and offer an example.

I'd like to focus in on a particular kind of communication.

- I'm going to give you a short list of communication-related words that I've heard people use when talking about the Office. Please, take a moment to look at the list. [Pause.] Now, tell me, which of these terms best describe what the Office of Sustainability does? You can pick up to three terms that you think most appropriate. Can you tell me why you think each of your choices applies?
- How do you see the balance between offering or presenting *information* and engaging in *persuasion or advocacy* with respect to sustainability?
- To what extent should the OS be engaged in persuasion or advocacy, in your view? Please explain.
- Imagine that you're giving advice to the Director of the OS. What advice would you give him in terms the best kinds of communication to encourage people to work for sustainability?

As we conclude the interview, I'd like to ask you about a specific dimension of communication: ethics.

- Like sustainability, ethics can mean different things to different people. How do you define ethics?
- How does a commitment to sustainability relate to ethics, in your view? What about at the individual level? What about at the organizational level?
- To what extent should ethics be featured in messages about sustainability, if at all?
- What kinds of explicit appeals to ethics in messages do you think have the greatest promise for bringing about changes in attitudes and practices?
- Are there types of communication that you believe would be unethical or ethically questionable if used by the OS or somebody else in pursuit of sustainability? Without naming names, can you give me an example from the past or a hypothetical example?

Group Interviews

Opening Script

Thank you for participating today. I am recording this session. If at any time you would like me to stop recording, please let me know. I may occasionally take notes, too.

My goal today is to get you, the members of the group, to discuss several matters amongst yourselves. While I may jump in to ask questions or move the conversation along, I'd like for you to talk and respond to one another. Please talk to me or ask me something if you need, though. I'd like you to share your own *and* respond to others' thoughts, stories, and suggestions.

There aren't "right" or "wrong" things to say here, and we can disagree with one another, though I would like to make sure that *everyone is able to participate actively*. I will try to focus the conversation. I'm going to structure the conversation around several prompts.

The first prompt is designed to open the conversation on the broad subject we're here to talk about: communication and persuasion related to sustainability at the [IWU] Office of Sustainability. The middle three prompts are based on statements that I've found interesting when observing the Office. The last prompt wraps up the session, which should be about [___time___]. If needed, we'll take a break half way through.

Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Introductions

First, I'd like us all to introduce ourselves. Please tell us your name, your primary roles at the University, and how your work is related to the Office of Sustainability. I'll begin. I'm Brenden Kendall, a doctoral candidate in the Department of Communication. This group is part of my dissertation research, which has focused on the Office of Sustainability for the last few years.

[Others introduce themselves.]

First Prompt

I want to get us started by talking about voice. I'm handing out papers with four major terms on it: Voice, and then access, standing, and influence. Each term is defined. Take a moment to read through these.

"The general trinity of voice theory holds that the key to effective process is an ongoing relationship of trust building to enhance community cohesiveness and capacity, and results in good environmental decisions."

Access refers to opportunity, potential, and safety. In its simplest form, it means that stakeholders have access to sufficient and appropriate opportunities to express my choices and opinions, as well as access to information and support.

Standing refers to the legitimacy, the respect, the esteem, and the consideration that all stakeholders' perspectives should be given.

Influence refers to stakeholders' ideas being respectfully considered along with those of other stakeholders, where representatives are part of the process that, for example, determines decision criteria and measures alternatives.

I would like to discuss how this approach to voice, in your experience, might be related (or unrelated) to the work that the Office of Sustainability does on campus.

Second Prompt

I'd now like to turn to the topic of advocacy. In my field research, I've heard advocacy talked about in a variety of ways. I'm passing out papers with three statements about sustainability advocacy on them. I would like to hear your reflections on or responses to these statements, as well as your thoughts about your experiences with advocacy at the Office of Sustainability.

1. *Sustainability advocacy should be an expression of our thoughts and feelings about sustainability-related matters, and our behavior should represent our individual principles.*
2. *Sustainability advocacy should be designed to be as effective as possible, given the conventional rules and procedures at the University.*
3. *Sustainability advocacy should be used to create and negotiate new ways for people to think about themselves, the university, the environment, and the concept of sustainability.*

Closing Prompt

Based specifically on our discussion today, what advice would you give to the Office of Sustainability staff as they do advocacy at [IWU]?

APPENDIX D

TRANSCRIPTIONIST CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

This document secures the agreement of a hired transcriptionist (the undersigned person) and researcher (Brenden Kendall) to specific measures ensuring the confidentiality of participants involved the study. In this document, “data” means any content related to the creation, collection, and transmission of research materials, including recordings, transcripts, notes, and miscellaneous messages. Signatories to this document promise:

- Not to discuss or disclose any contextual information about the study or participants, beyond the following: “The doctoral study addressed communication and environmental advocacy at a U.S. public university.”
 - The researcher may provide other appropriate descriptions of the research, which will maintain participant confidentiality, as needed for the transcriptionist’s professional purposes (e.g., resumes, advertising).
- Not to discuss or disclose the content of any study data to anyone other than the primary researcher or members of his research team (e.g., faculty advisor).
- To hold in strict confidence the identity of any individual revealed during the recording or transcription of research data.
- To respect the privacy of study participants. The transcriptionist will not attempt to further identify, study, or contact study participants.
- To store data securely. In electronic form, the data should be stored on password protected computers or other storage devices. In print form, data should be stored in secure containers.
- To transmit research data via secure means, such as password-protected file transfer sites on the Internet.
- To destroy any data copies at the request of the researcher, and make no copies in addition to those necessary to create, transmit, and secure research data.
- To notify the researcher immediately in the instance of a threat to or breach of confidentiality.
- To, in all situations, select options that provide greater certainty of confidentiality for study participants.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in research data to which I have access.

Transcriptionist: [Print Name] _____
[Signature] _____ Date: _____

Researcher: Brenden E. Kendall
[Signature] _____ Date: _____

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