Consistency and inconsistency in organisations: A dialectical perspective

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Much existing scholarship positions consistency and inconsistency as mutually exclusive opposites. Indeed, common-sense seems to imply that consistency and inconsistency are mutually exclusive: the words themselves are set in opposition to each other. However, this oppositional approach may lead us to neglect the fact that their existence must be understood in relational terms - that is, in terms that recognise the co-existence of consistency and inconsistency in discourse and practice, their relation to each other, and the power dynamics that characterise their interactions. For example, consistent communication, when deployed as a strategy to cope with complexity, might be interpreted as a reaction to inconsistent communication; a tool to combat inconsistent practices; or a unifying narrative designed to maintain stability in the face of uncertain environmental conditions (see, for example, Cornelissen, 2014). Inconsistent communication, on the other hand, may be understood as a contestation of 'consistent' but inaccurate messages; as resistance to marginalisation; or as an assertion of difference and complexity (see, for example, L.T. Christensen, Morsing, & Cheney, 2008).

In this essay, I adopt a dialectical approach to analyse the connections between consistency and inconsistency in organisational communication, to highlight the ways relational thinking might prompt new research directions.

Dialectical thinking

Dialectical thinking takes interconnectedness as its starting point. That is to say, oppositions may exist, but they are never fully separate (and are, therefore, never fully 'opposites') (Harvey, 1996). The relations between opposing forces, the ways these relations are produced over time and space, and the contradictory ways in which they are enacted, are the matters of interest (Howard & Geist, 1995; Mitchell, 2002). In dialectical relationships, fluidity is assumed: as the micro- and macro-level context changes, shifts in relations between oppositions emerge over time (Mumby, 2005). Thus, fluidity moves analytical

attention away from attempting to define and model practices and processes that lead to inconsistency, or that map ways to re-establish consistency in the face of complex challenges. Instead, the object of research is the changing relationship between consistency and inconsistency in contexts where both exist and call the 'other' into existence simultaneously and in different ways over time. For example, the uptake of mediatisation processes in the public sector has changed the way communication is integrated into operational processes (Pallas, Fredriksson, & Wedlin, 2016), producing new tensions between a commercialised approach to reputation management (which may require consistency in communication) and a public service approach to delivery (which may require a differentiated approach to communication, based on citizen needs).

Ontologically, dialectical thinking means that consistency and inconsistency must be understood as social constructions that emerge in relation to each other and in response to certain environmental conditions. It entails a strong focus on the changing dynamics of power, its meaning and manifestation as it circulates among different groups attempting to influence complex situations (J. Martin & Nakayama, 1999; 2010; Mumby, 2005). The focus is on the "interpretive struggles among discourses and practices… [where]..social actors attempt to "fix" meanings in ways that resist and/or reproduce extant relations of power" (Mumby, 2005: 24).

Applying the dialectical perspective to consistency and inconsistency

From a dialectical perspective, then, consistency and inconsistency are constituted through interpretive struggles, understood and evaluated in terms of their 'other' rather than in isolation and intimately connected to power. Claims of consistency and accusations of inconsistency are therefore always, to a certain extent, ideological and offer material advantages to certain groups or individuals. This leads to considerations of the conditions in which consistency and inconsistency may dominate organisational communication, including

the ways in which their discourses produce subjectivities and relations of truth, power and knowledge (Fairclough, 2009).

The approach can be illustrated by drawing on three different aspects of normative strategic communication literature, where the idea of consistency is implicitly or explicitly reflected in different aspects of communication practice (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2014). First the (ideal) communicator embodies strategic management skills that enable them to use communication to manage dissent, simplify complexity and generate unity from diversity. Their activities thus depend on the prevalence of inconsistency in practice and discourse, which provides a purpose for their existence and a foil for defining when consistency might be understood to be achieved.

Second, the strategic power of the consistent communicator is manifest as the power to persuade audiences to accept desirable messages (or, alternatively, to co-create messages with audiences in a way that organisational needs are met), thereby reifying those messages as a form of 'truth' about their organisation. However, power is always subject to resistance; correspondingly, consistency as organisational 'truth' is always open to subversion by actors departing from their 'scripts'. In other words, the pursuit of consistency as a disciplinary communicative goal is dependent on the ongoing presence of inconsistency as resistance. Finally, the consistent communicator evidences their prowess through certain practices that they and others must follow (e.g. structured and well-defined communication procedures, campaign planning processes, well-managed evaluations, audience surveillance) (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006; Gregory, 2015). The production of guides, documents and reports reflects the need to continually manage communication, which otherwise runs the risk of getting out of control – specifically, out of the control of both the communicator and the organisation. Thus, the need for consistency in communication as a means of securing certainty, is dependent on the existence of a risky, inconsistent communicative environment.

Adopting the dialectical perspective to interrogate consistency in this way leads to a new understanding of how the voices and actions of people who do not conform to the privileged narrative are nonetheless crucial to that narrative's existence. There is no demand for consistent communication unless messy environments, marginalised discourses and contested practices are first acknowledged. They may be framed as troublesome or deficient but they are also ontologically essential as the 'other' against which consistency defines itself. Thus, efforts to impose consistent communication may be understood as reactions to the 'other', particularly when the 'other' is experienced as an existential threat (e.g. insofar as inconsistency may lead to the removal of departmental resources, or the loss of influence on organisational decision-making). Equally, efforts to assert inconsistent messages and practices may be a reaction to the hegemonic power of consistency, experienced as a reduction in the value of autonomy, identity and uniqueness. It also follows from these insights that the preservation of self-interest inevitably plays into the relationship between consistency and inconsistency in organisational communication, on an ongoing basis (J. Martin & Nakayama, 2015).

Conclusion

As the above examples illustrate, the dialectical approach is an ideological intervention that can reinforce the importance of new ways of thinking about consistency and inconsistency in organisational realities. It engages with the tense connection between consistency and inconsistency, rather than constructing them as an either/or opposition. They emerge in relation to each other, rather than as pre-existing constructs. As opposing but mutually constitutive dimensions of organisational communication, their separate function can be recognised, but this does not demand that we privilege one concept over the other. Rather, we may focus on the tensions that emerge from their co-existence and interrogate the assumptions that underpin existing theory and practice.

For example, for those advocating consistency, the dialectical approach exposes the tendency to mask or ignore the fact that modernist ideals of unitary, centralised communication (see, e.g. Gregory, 2015; Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2002; Schultz, Hatch, Larsen, Fombrun, & Rindova, 2002; Whetten, 2006) inevitably marginalise disruptive voices and are therefore an exercise in hegemonic power – but also depend on those voices for their existence. Similarly, for those who aim to rehabilitate inconsistency in organisational communication, the dialectical approach counters the implicit oppositions that are necessary to their arguments - for example, consistent communication as a mythical, unattainable organisational goal versus inconsistency as actually-existing organisational discourse; or consistency as inflexible and limiting versus inconsistency as adaptive and potentially productive (see, e.g. Brunsson, 1986; L. T. Christensen & Langer, 2009; L.T. Christensen et al., 2008).

The socially constructed nature of dialectical relationships also prompts a more conscious integration of context into research questions about consistency and inconsistency in organisational communication. This calls for a more explicit focus on how their relationship emerges in discourse and practice over time and in different places, how changes in the construction and enactment of one prompt a reaction in its 'other', and under what conditions they are most actively contested.

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