Transformative Practice and Research in Organizational Communication

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Chapter 16
Reworking Resistance:
A Postcolonial Perspective on International NGOs

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ABSTRACT

Scholars recognize that both nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and non-Western organizational logics harbor the potential to reconfigure fundamental assumptions of organizational research. Drawing from such work, I argue that we must reconceptualize 'resistance' in organizational communication scholarship by destabilizing its Western-centric assumptions and logics. I do so by engaging in a postcolonial analysis of scholarship on international NGOs, and drawing out typical assumptions of organizational communication work that do not hold under all cultural conditions, or that are imperialistic in nature. Answering calls to center alternative forms of organizing and to draw deeper relations between critical intercultural and organizational communication research, this study asks scholars to resist typical theorizations of 'resistance,' and decolonize organizational theory.

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, many academic fields have realized the growing importance of the nonprofit sector to contemporary organizing processes and social change. In organizational communication, Lewis's (2005) influential article marked a turning point in studies of nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), after scholars began to study such organizations as important in themselves, rather than using them as examples of theories generalizable across all organizations. Following Lewis's article, organizational work on NGOs has been and is still on the rise (Koschmann, 2012), and scholars recognize that "the increasing interest… in the dizzying array of organizations located in the space between the market and the state" is "long overdue" (Schwabenland, 2014, p. 421).

Even as NGOs constitute an important part of up-and-coming, innovative theoretical work, scholarship on international organizations is also on the rise (Kramer, Lewis, & Gossett, 2015; Pal & Buzzanell, 2013). As corporations and NGOs increasingly serve and employ people from a variety of cultural

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backgrounds, geographic locations, and economic circumstances, the role of international and intercultural analyses becomes increasingly imperative to rigorous organizational scholarship. Thus, the point of intersection between NGOs and international organizations is a salient and urgent space to research (Norander & Harter, 2012).

This growing and critical sector forms the basis for my investigation into the way resistance is conceptualized and studied in organizational communication. Scholars recognize that both NGOs (Koschmann, 2012; Lewis, 2005) and non-Western organizational logics (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007; A. Prasad, 2003) harbor the potential to reconfigure some of the fundamental presuppositions of organizational research, as "even basic concepts contain cultural assumptions" (Zaharna, 2016, p. 205). Answering calls to center alternate forms of resistance (Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005; Prasad & Prasad, 2003a) and to draw deeper relations between critical intercultural and organizational communication research (Allen, 2010; Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005), this study opens previously untapped conceptual space through a postcolonial analysis of organizational phenomena.

In this essay, I draw from postcolonial work in organizational communication and organization studies, primarily, in order to re-read current work in the field on international NGOs from a perspective sensitive to (neo)colonial power dynamics. I begin by examining the relationship between (neo) colonial power relations and international NGOs, arguing that a framework attendant to such power dynamics is necessary to address three levels of relation in which international NGOs are enmeshed: the macro level of international relations, the mezzo level of organizational dynamics, and the micro level of interpersonal relations. Next, I draw forth three ways that a postcolonial organizational framework calls us to resist current framings of resistance, each of which has implications across the levels of power dynamics: resisting subject-led ideas of resistance, resisting polarized framings of resistance, and resisting organizationally-contained conceptualizations of resistance. Applying these insights across the macro, mezzo, and micro levels, I theorize postcolonial resistance at each level of interaction and analysis. Finally, I describe the theoretical implications of reworking resistance for organizational communication scholarship writ-large.

POSTCOLONIALISM AND INTERNATIONAL NGOS

The dynamics involved in studying international NGOs demand attention to postcolonialism for two main reasons. First, the power relationships of which NGOs are a constitutive element require an attention to postcolonial critique. Dempsey (2012) argues that "[t]he development of richer theories of nonprofits must include a sustained focus on how communication and organizing are inextricably linked with power" (p. 147), since such forms of organizing are not outside of power, and in fact add their own unique dynamics. Postcolonial theory is well-suited to critique power relations involving international and intercultural dynamics, as it:

> *Seeks to understand (neo)colonialism and other related phenomena by means of investigating the role therein not only of Western political and economic practices, but also …of Western culture, knowledge, and epistemology. (Prasad & Prasad, 2003b, p. 284)*

Second, postcolonial theory is necessary to open possibilities constrained or hidden under traditional Western analytical frameworks. Norander and Harter (2012) point toward the possibility of postcolonial

theory "for understanding the transformative potential (and consequences) of organizing" (p. 75) that typical organizational theories are not capable of either recognizing or addressing. Therefore, postcolonial theory is necessary to work regarding international NGOs in order to both critique current theories and open conceptual space for innovative theoretical work.

Shome and Hegde (2002) define postcolonial studies as "an interdisciplinary field of inquiry committed to theorizing the problematics of colonization and decolonization" (p. 250). Postcolonialism "offers different ways of understanding the world" (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2007, p. 254) that are typically obscured by Western-centric perspectives. That is, rather than focusing on the conceptual mastery and complete understanding typically desired by Western inheritors of Enlightenment rationality and scientific searches for knowledge, postcolonialism "is about borderlands and hybridity. It is about cultural indeterminacy and spaces in between," which means "[r]esisting attempts at any totalizing forms of cultural understanding" (Shome, 1996, p. 44). In resisting the certainty posited or sought by Western intellectual traditions, postcolonialism avoids the critiques of other "de-westernization" theories—which construct binary relationships between the West and non-West (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014)—and instead centers contradiction and ambivalence.

Since postcolonial theory often focuses on the politics of representation and epistemology, "postcoloniality and communication are intertwined in each other" (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 249) in a way that makes postcolonial critique and invention salient to any communicative study. However, postcolonial theory as of yet has had little impact in communication studies or organization studies. As Pal and Buzzanell (2013) put it: "It is not an exaggeration to say that the field of communication has largely remained impervious to postcolonial studies" (p. 2). I echo Jack et al. (2011) who believe that, though postcolonial theories and methods have begun to be incorporated in organization studies, scholars do not yet attend to the questions and concerns raised in enough detail, or with enough force. That is, organizational studies has been "excessively frugal in its consumption of [the] panoply of resources" offered by postcolonial theory (p. 279). This section addresses such concerns by examining how postcolonial theory is necessary to understanding the power dynamics of NGOs at three levels: international, organizational, and interpersonal.

RELATIONAL LEVELS

Macro Level: International Power Relations

On the broadest level, NGOs are imbricated in international power relations, which require attention to the idea of "untrustworthy natives," the legacy of the ethnographic imagination, and the impact of NGOs on policy and public opinion. For one, international NGOs generally depend on an assumption that foreign populations cannot be trusted to fix their own problems. This mindset is a legacy of colonization, using "soft power" to construct indirect control through humanitarian aid and good will, rather than direct control through military or colonial occupation (Cobbs Hoffman, 1998). International NGOs and other ostensible attempts to assuage social and economic injustice in foreign countries ironically work to solve problems that are created and maintained by Western countries in the first place (Banerjee, 2011; Easterly, 2006; Ferguson, 2006; Rodney, 2011).

Murphy and Dixon (2012) provide a clear example of how the workings of international NGOs to some extent depend on or reinforce logics that assume the inability of indigenous peoples to address

their own issues, or run an organization at all. Describing a young U.S. American college graduate who began an aid organization to assist communities in Uganda, Murphy and Dixon explain that when it was suggested that the organization move toward more Ugandan management, the director responded with laughter, and said: "Running [the organization]? Everybody knows you can't trust them with the money or the organization." (p. 168). Sadly, as the authors' note, the young director's "charity model" vision of the relationship of [the organization] to the people it seeks to serve is not uncommon in international nonprofits. The power relationship is dependency based and grounded in those with resources "helping those without" (p. 169). From a postcolonial perspective, this model of the organization, and the interpretation of indigenous peoples upon which it is based, merit interrogation and reformulation.

Further, the existence of international NGOs also depends on the legacy of the ethnographic imagination (P. Prasad, 2003). The ethnographic imagination is the desire to consume "narratives of exotic cultures" collected for an audience by the brave ethnographer who is willing to enter exotic lands and attempt to understand exotic peoples (P. Prasad, 2003, p. 153). The ways in which international NGOs are able to garner financial support from donors often involve depictions of "exotic cultures" and lands of mysticism, beauty, and adventure. Although this may not initially seem harmful, it references the same colonial imagination as the dependency-based view of the organization. By implying that the international other exists outside of Western rationality, NGOs use foreign peoples in an Orientalist fashion, projecting certain depictions of *them* in order to construct *the self* in opposition (Mbembe, 2001; Said, 1978). As Kalonaityte (2010) notes, "within the idea of Europe, the non-West is imagined in terms of lack, not content" (p. 36), and that lack may be filled as is convenient for Western logics to maintain dominance. Often, in the case of NGOs, this involves a depiction of inability and deprivation in order to paint the Westerner in opposition as the rescuing hero.

Finally, international NGOs are involved in international power relations because of their influential relation to policy and public opinion. Koschmann (2012) describes how, in "American culture, 'nonprofit' has come to mean more than the financial distribution constraints on a particular organization; it has developed an *ethos* that implies a particular way of working and relating in society" (p. 142) that gives the organization clout on the public stage. Dempsey (2012) adds that the NGO *ethos* is not only important in relation to the nation-state, but also in connection to "the various ways in which nonprofits are positioned in relation to the market and commercializing interests" (p. 148), as the boundaries between NGOs and business ventures become less and less distinguishable.

Mezzo Level: Organizational Power Relations

On the intermediate level, international NGOs take part in and constitute organizational power relations, which involve problematics of representation, legitimacy, and accountability. To begin, international NGOs require an engagement with representational politics. Nonprofits "differ in terms of the extent to which they emerge from, and are led by, those directly experiencing the social problem being addressed by the organization" (Dempsey, 2012, p. 148). At best, this differentiation leads to NGO work that is instituted on behalf of a community by members of the community who have a vested interest in improving the conditions in which they live. However, on the international level, NGOs tend to be separate entities, comprised of a variety of international actors rather than community members. As Dempsey (2012) observes, in in some "problematic cases, nonprofits function as self-elected representatives" (p. 148) of other communities and peoples. All international NGOs represent others to some extent, but the degree to which they are connected to their constituents differs. Following Dempsey (2009), then,

a postcolonial perspective should "[challenge] the tendency to position civil society organizations as transparently reflecting the desires and wishes of willing subjects" (p. 329), and instead reflect on the power relations that are involved in representation.

In addition to representational politics, there are power dynamics involved in the varying degrees of accountability international NGOs have to the communities they ostensibly represent. In the Brazilian context, Peruzzo (2009) explains that "the main beneficiary [of NGOs] is the public, and communication aims to fulfill the interests and needs of the other; working on behalf of the public is the organization's 'reason for being'" (p. 666). However, the notion of 'the public' becomes complicated in international and intercultural NGO work.

Multiple organizational theorists have questioned whether or not NGOs are mainly working on behalf of their constituents or if they are driven by some other goal (Dempsey, 2007; Ganesh, 2003; Gill & Wells, 2014). One way this can be interrogated is by asking "how the NGO itself conceives of its accountability to local communities" (Ganesh, 2003, p. 564). Clearly connected to international-level power dynamics through neocolonial ideas of indigenous peoples as incapable and untrustworthy, a lack of accountability to aid recipients reinforces the idea that they do not need to be—or cannot handle being—involved in organizational control and decision-making. Yet, increased accountability is not necessarily a solution to such problematic relations. For one, NGOs are often loath to become more engaged with community-level decision makers because "increased accountability with local communities is often seen as an antidote to donor control" (Dempsey, 2007, p. 314), and can lead to reduced funding. Second, and more politically important, the intense focus on accountability can lead to "a tyranny of accountability" (Dempsey, 2007, p. 315), where the obsession with accountability obscures other imperialistic and (neo)colonial power relations. For example, Western funders often design and use quantitative check-lists that do not align with the complex circumstances of the organizational work on the ground. When funders increase resources to projects deemed successful by such measures, what the community actually needs, desires, and uses can easily fall through the cracks. The obsession with accountability then leads to imperialistically implementing programs based on Western perspectives rather than local understandings.

The politics of accountability are complicated further by a focus on legitimacy. If the organization is more concerned with its perceived efficacy in the eyes of its donors than its constituents, then services will suffer. Legitimacy becomes constructing an identity that reflects the ideologies and practices of donor/volunteers (Gill and Wells, 2014). NGOs acquire legitimacy to the extent that the organization is able to match its work to the mindset of a Western donor. Thus, not only is the organization possibly imposing itself where it is not wanted or warranted, but it also has more concern for its own self-perpetuation than discovering whether it is wanted or warranted. When legitimacy competes with accountability, organizations "spend more time and energy justifying their work to transnational funding networks, ignoring larger questions of their relevance to, and the needs and priorities of, their local constituents" (Ganesh, 2003, p. 565). Ultimately, NGOs can only justify this imbalance with the neocolonial assumptions described above. If international constituents were taken as actors, the organization would not have such problems of accountability and legitimacy, and perhaps the organization would not even exist.

Therefore, the problem with focusing on the intermediate level of power relations is that organizational communication studies often become enamored with representational politics to the extent that the other two levels (of international and interpersonal power dynamics) are not taken into account. Many studies using postcolonial theory tend to prioritize representational politics (Jack et al., 2011), rather than incorporating other aspects of postcolonial work. Given the explanation above, this can be

dangerous in that it elides the connection between levels through which certain problematic ideas and practices are reinforced and reimplemented.

Micro Level: Interpersonal Power Relations

On the most local level, international NGOs involve power relations between individuals, which require attention to intercultural relations, conceptualizations of the body, and the inclusion or exclusion of emotion. Murphy and Dixon (2012) state: "When working in international collaborations, we maintain the position that *we cannot ignore the complex ways in which our social identities intersect, conflict, form, and resist power relationships*" (p. 166, emphasis in original). Similarly, I would add that organization scholars also need to attend to the complex power dynamics of social identities in their *analyses* of international collaborations. A thorough analysis of interpersonal intercultural dynamics would include the relation between NGO workers and the local community, between Western NGO workers and non-Western NGO workers, and between the local community and the organization itself.

For instance, most work on international NGOs engaged with thus far has relegated the individuals being served to the sideline of analysis. Although studies have questioned whether or not local needs are being met, the indigenous peoples' opinions are rarely asked. In fact, I have yet to see many organizational communication studies regarding international NGOs that directly engage the opinions of those being "served." This egregious deficiency further supports the necessity of a postcolonial perspective to undermine the assumptions of the field. For a field focused on organizations and processes of organizing, the centrality of the workers and organization itself makes sense. However, thorough scholarship on international NGOs cannot continue to elide indigenous perspectives.

Scholars of interpersonal power relations in international NGOs also must pay attention to physical bodies and conceptualizations of the body. In connection to the point above, Jack et al. (2011) argue that:

There remain whole zones of organisation-related situations, relations and persons that still have no voice within [organization studies], whose interests are simply not attended to, and whose life-worlds seem to be taken as non-consequential. (p. 294)

By attending to the bodies involved in NGO work, organizational scholars will be more likely to also be attentive to their thoughts, attitudes, and actions as well. Khan and Koshul (2011) argue for a postcolonial focus on the body as a means "for theorizing not just domination but also resistance and agency" (p. 318). As bodies are often dismissed in white, male, Western-centric scholarship, bringing them back into focus could allow for postcolonial insights into ways of thinking, being, and acting obscured by mainstream organizational communication research.

Emotion has been similarly derided in traditional social scientific work. However, Grimes and Parker (2009) remind organizational scholars to be careful about dismissing work that is emotional or political, as this ultimately reinforces a Western rational-imperialist standard that non-Western work would contest. In a similar manner, the celebration or derision of emotion in international NGOs is also replete with postcolonial power dynamics. By analyzing how emotion is allowed, under what circumstances, and by whose jurisdiction, or to what bodies emotion is attached in representational work, a postcolonial perspective can reveal important power dynamics not often recognized.

Of course, the three levels of power relations presented here are not distinct, but must be accounted for *in relation to one another*. Our scholarship should not separate one level from the others, but must take

their interwoven nature into account in studies of international NGOs. Otherwise, studies that attempt to focus on the marginalized can end up reinforcing dominant discourses by portraying them in essentializing and homogenizing ways (Dempsey, 2007), and studies that attempt to focus on the organization could obscure how organizational dynamics are related to both micro-processes and national ideologies.

RESISTING WESTERN-CENTRIC FRAMINGS OF RESISTANCE

Now that we have established a basis for understanding the power relations operating at three levels of international NGO relations, I here examine the way postcolonial work challenges current formulations of resistance. I am calling for organizational scholars to resist Western-centric notions of 'resistance' in three ways: by refusing to centralize the subject, by refusing to consider resistance along only one axis, and by refusing to contain resistance within the organization. In the following section, I will bring these two analyses together by showing how postcolonial reconceptualizations of resistance would affect the current understanding of power relations at each of the three levels previously introduced.

It might not be immediately clear why resistance must be reconceptualized in the first place. Postcolonial theory "exists in tension with established institutionalized knowledge" (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 250), and if it is not being presented as such, then a fundamental part of the theory is being obscured. Postcolonialism:

Tries to redo [academic] epistemic structures by writing against them, over them, and from below them by inviting reconnections to obliterated pasts and forgotten presents that never made their way into the history of knowledge. (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 250)

However, many empirical postcolonial interventions stop short at questioning key organizational communication concepts, such as resistance. In order to grasp the depth of postcolonial theory, "we need to understand […how] postcolonial theory might defamiliarize organizational phenomena" (A. Prasad, 2003, p. 30).

According to Prasad and Prasad (2003a), the main ways that postcolonial theory reconfigures resistance is by recognizing that it can be both conscious and unconscious, and centering mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity. To do so, "tensions, inconsistencies and ambivalences need to be brought forth as a record of ongoing resistance and subversion" (Kalonaityte, 2010, p. 32). Kalonaityte (2010), drawing from Bhabha (1994), argues that the imperialistically marginalized often cannot engage in direct forms of resistance, and therefore our theoretical lenses must be shifted to account for the more subtle forms resistance might take. Drawing from these works, I argue that organizational communication scholars need to problematize three key assumptions in current formulations of resistance: the centrality of the subject, dialectical relations, and the organization as container of resistant acts.

Resisting Subject-Led Resistance

Prasad and Prasad (2003a) argue that most workplace resistance research assumes *conscious* resistance, and researchers should consider *unconscious* resistance as well. They argue that "in linking resistance to self-consciousness, the thinking of non-managerialist organizational researchers may be seen as being conditioned by notions of logical consistency" that are Euro-centric in nature (p. 107). They also men-

tion that linking resistance to self-consciousness helps to "safeguard [traditional philosophical notions of] Western subjectivity" (p. 109). Therefore, the tendency to assume resistance can only be conscious is predicated in Western-centric logics that work to maintain the fiction of an essential and whole self. Yet, few studies of resistance—even ostensibly postcolonial studies—question the centrality of conscious rationality and the assumption of the unified subject (cf. Pal & Buzzanell, 2013).

One way in which conscious, subject-led constructions of resistance become an issue is in the proffering of reflexivity as a panacea for problematic power relations. Norander and Harter (2012), for instance, fail to take the unconscious into account in their account of reflexivity. They consider reflexivity "a process whereby NGOs can critically engage the contradictions involved in transnational advocacy" (p. 98). However, there are a few problems with this reflexivity-centered approach. First, a substantial amount of resistance and behavior in organizations is unconscious (Prasad and Prasad, 2003a). Thus, reflexivity can never be fully conscious or aware of itself, and can never fully eradicate the politics inherent in international relations. Second, and perhaps more importantly, a focus on reflexivity centers the Westerner. No one ever calls for the non-Western aid recipient to "be reflexive." It seems unnecessary, as they are assumed to already be aware of and engaged with such power relations as a necessary part of survival (Sandoval, 2000). While reflexivity is an important analytic, its use must be tempered by recognition of the unconscious aspects of behavior, thought, and relations. In fact, here we can see that even the conceptual use of reflexivity in scholarship *reveals a lack of reflexivity* in the way that the non-Westerner is obscured by its central use. That is, by focusing on reflexivity, Norander and Harter fail, to some extent, to be reflexive themselves in its use. This is not an indictment of their work, but rather an example of how reflexivity is never finalized. No matter how much reflexivity is able to accomplish in equalizing power relations, it cannot eradicate politics in total.

Rather than fully controlling resistance, subjects are constituted in and by the situations around them. One perspective that de-centers resistance as subject-led is Kalonaityte's (2010) postcolonial performative view. She notes that "the performative subverts the notion of cultural purity, exposing that even those who are granted superior cultural identity as birthright, may not be in the possession of the cultural capital the narrative of cultural essence suggests they should be" (pp. 38-39). By destabilizing the essence of the subject, resistance becomes an accomplishment that actually *produces the subject*, rather than the subject producing it.

The important question then becomes "not… whether or not the worker in question was self-conscious about the resistant nature of his/her action, but what could be the ethical/political effects, consequences, and implications of categorizing a particular act as resistance" (Prasad & Prasad, 2003a, p. 114). Deciding whether or not something counts as resistance, to Prasad and Prasad (2003a), is fundamentally an ethico-political act. By assuming that an unethical act must be conscious or intended, we lose sight of other important ethico-political aspects of our own scholarship and acts of representation.

Resisting Pair-Based Views of Resistance

Ambivalence and hybridity, though often cited in postcolonial organizational analyses, have yet to be taken seriously in the ways they trouble our own theoretical assumptions and formulations. Although organizational theorists have moved from an understanding of power as the binary opposite of resistance to an understanding of power as struggle (Norander & Harter, 2012), there continues to be an unnecessary affinity for pairs and poles in organizational theoretical work. In part, this stems from a Western cultural tendency toward dualistic thought (Stohr, 2015; Zaharna, 2016). In order to take postcolonial

theory seriously, I argue that we need to move beyond paired notions of struggle and tension toward a multifaceted conceptualization of constitutive factors. Rather than locating a continuum between two poles, we should move toward embracing the infinite spaces constituted for resistance.

For instance, in their postcolonial study of resistance in Indian call centers, Pal and Buzzanell (2013) focus on power-resistance dialectics. By portraying power and resistance in this manner, as two ends of a continuum, the field for conceptualizing resistance is already greatly constrained, and the logics within which resistance can be found operate on an axis rather than throughout a multi-dimensional field. In this manner, Pal and Buzzanell exemplify some theoretical constraints throughout the discipline—the "tensions" and "struggle" so popular as thematics for organizational analysis need not be constrained in this manner. However, when attempting to undermine Western-centric logics through a postcolonial analysis, it is difficult (if not impossible) to realize all of one's conceptual constraints. Tensions and struggles need not be formed into pairs, yet they almost always are. Common pairs are control and resistance, and structure and agency. What new theoretical space could be opened by considering such relations as multidimensional and multifaceted rather than polarized? A postcolonial frame should de-center dialectical thought to move toward more fluid and radically contextualized conceptualizations of resistance.

In an essay co-authored with Brenda Berkelaar, we begin to explore how simultaneously looking at dimensions of culture, materiality, and temporality helps scholars and managers "to consider interrelated contextual factors that otherwise might be obscured when examining discourse" (Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015, p. 434). When workplace tensions are thought of as control versus resistance, both control and resistance become reified as monolithic and unchanging poles in a stable binary, which can lead to shallow and sometimes inaccurate interpretations of the experiences being studied. In our article, we found that surface-level analyses of Tanzanian narratives could lead to an easy—and inaccurate—equation with Horatio Alger tales in the U.S. Instead, tracing resistance as it shifts through momentary cultural constructs, material circumstances, and temporal movements could lead to a deeper understanding of how resistance relates to these unstable contextual factors. By providing in-depth interpretations of why resistance came into being, how it has developed, and how it could be strengthened in the future, such analyses could also open the possibility of asking whether resistance is indeed always tied to control, or whether the relationship between the two, often taken as a given, is actually premised on certain contextual arrangements.

That is, postcolonial theory should look to trace "tensions and inconsistencies within the discourses of cultural difference" (Kalonaityte, 2010, p. 38) in a more complex manner, taking into account a variety of mutually constitutive relations. As "postcolonial commitments can blur discursive, spatial, and epistemological boundaries around questions of organizing and communicating" (Broadfoot & Munshi, 2014, p. 151), we should examine how the blurring of boundaries implicates more factors than are often accounted for in our understandings of resistance.

Resisting Organizationally Contained Resistance

Most studies of resistance in organizational scholarship are located at the workplace level (Banerjee, 2011; Prasad & Prasad, 2003a). Although there have been calls to broaden understandings of resistance to account for grassroots social movements as forms of organizing (Ganesh, Zoller, & Cheney, 2005) and connect resistance to broad-scale economic change (Pal & Buzzanell, 2013; Banerjee, 2011), for the most part resistance remains *within* the organization. In the case of international NGOs, this must be expanded in order to account for the interweaving power relations that affect multiple levels of analysis.

First, international NGOs, as they bridge at least two different cultures, geographical spaces, or peoples, necessitate attention to the macro level as well. Organizational resistance is already constrained and enabled by larger cultural and discursive forces, and to obscure that in theoretical or empirical analysis is Western-centric at best. At the same time that resistance on the organizational level does not necessarily start there, it will not end there, either. That is, organizational resistance has the potential to cause large-scale change both economically (Banerjee, 2011) and culturally (Dempsey, 2012), and to ignore this potentiality is to close off interesting and important branches of theories of resistance.

Second, international NGOs, as they place individuals from different cultural perspectives in direct contact with one another, necessitate attention to the micro level as well. Koschmann (2012) notes that NGOs are fundamentally communicative, constituted by the micro acts of interaction that can be regarded as forming all organizations. Murphy and Dixon (2012) add that such interactions are never politically neutral. Power relations on the individual level help to form the political girding of the organization itself. Similarly, the organization can be seen as speaking back to the individual level, also acting to reconstitute interpersonal dynamics.

How then do such postcolonial considerations of resistance affect our understanding of power relations at various levels of NGO analysis? I argue that we need to look at the three levels of power dynamics—international or macro, the organizational or mezzo, and the interpersonal or micro—in fluid and variable relation to come to a nuanced understanding of the possibility of resistance in international NGOs. In doing so, we necessarily must reconfigure our assumptions regarding what resistance is and can be, and how one might study it in an international NGO.

REWORKING RESISTANCE: POSTCOLONIAL RECONFIGURATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL NGOS

In this section, I rework current understandings of resistance in organizational communication theory through a postcolonial lens sensitive to multiple levels of power dynamics. In order to move toward decolonizing in organizational communication, we must examine our Western-centric assumptions, and resistance offers an obvious place to start. For one, the concept is central to critical work in the field, which is also concerned with power dynamics and politics. In addition, resistance remains a rather unproblematized term often used in analyses and theoretical work.

As Shome (1996) notes, the inclusion of alternative perspectives is not enough; we must allow for other perspectives to challenge, shake, and perhaps deconstruct the very bases of our own assumptions, theories, and work. Mere inclusion simply stretches "the canon" (p. 46), keeping the center stable. For anti-colonial work, the center must be thrown off-balance or dissolved. However, this is not only a process of critique, as "unsettling, disrupting and displacing (the logics and trajectories of) the Western discourse of management, [can give] radically new meanings and directions to the theory, research and practice of management" (A. Prasad, 2012, p. 22). For instance, consider the following statement that Mynster & Edwards (2014) make regarding an international NGO: "Their [the organization's] survival depends on generating enough support to legitimize their cause in the eyes of those who have the power to make the social change in which they are interested" (p. 323). This statement exemplifies the Western-centric assumptions framing resistance at three different levels. First, on an international level, the power to make change is primarily conceptualized as economic. This is a Western capitalistic vision of change. Perhaps, from a differing cultural perspective, the "power to make social change"—and thus, to resist—might

instead stem from community connections. Second, on the organizational level, the statement implies that the survival of the organization is positive and desired. However, the organization's survival might only be desired from a Western perspective, and not from that of those being served. Third, following from the first point, since the comment describes an international NGO, non-Western people are not considered able to implement their own change.

As Grimes and Parker (2009) note:

We must ready our discipline as a space for the difficult dialogues that need to happen and ready ourselves as individuals to be involved with decolonizing work . . . Only then can we being to think about what decolonized research would or might look like. (p. 510)

Before cementing what postcolonial resistance is or is not, we need to decolonize the way that we think about resistance itself. Here, I reconsider resistance on three levels: the macro level of international relations, the mezzo level of organizational dynamics, and the micro level of interpersonal interactions.

The Macro Level: Postcolonial Resistance on an International Scale

Organizational communication, as a field, has typically "been concerned with the communicative practices of *individuals* in organizations" (Ganesh, Zoller & Cheney, 2005, p. 173, emphasis added), which has led to an under-theorization of the way micro-acts of resistance are tied to or challenge macro-level ideological and economic moorings. Drawing from the moves to think resistance beyond conscious subjects and dialectical tensions, I argue that postcolonial resistance should assume neither conscious actors, nor the stability of current international power relations. As Shome (1996) argues, "it is important to place the texts that we critique or the theories that we produce against a larger backdrop of …the contemporary global politics of (neo)imperialism" (p. 41). By interrogating how organizations reflect, deconstruct, or shift global politics, we can reformulate resistance as both a conscious and unconscious action of organizations, organizational networks, and the discursive system surrounding NGOs.

For one, this conceptual system does not constrain NGOs to a dialectic of reflecting/resisting problematic international power relations, but allows for a myriad of shifts and changes to the system itself. In many theoretical essays on international NGOs, the organizations are considered to be reflections of Western belief systems, but rarely are they considered actors in shifting those systems (for an exception, see Dempsey, 2012).

Additionally, this conceptualization of resistance would take into account the possible dissolution of the market economy. In recognizing that NGOs are themselves thoroughly steeped in capitalist logics and motivations, no matter how hard they may seek to rid themselves of such aspects (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010), scholars may point toward ways that NGOs themselves, or the discursive system surrounding NGOs, can resist or reformulate these logics on a larger scale. Most current theory on the nonprofit sector is economic in nature, which accepts the market economy without question and "assum[es] human behavior is primarily about consuming goods and services and acquiring resources" (Koschmann, 2012, p. 140). By considering NGOs as resistant actors or parts of resistant systems in this manner, NGOs could be considered resistant in their very formation. That is, as nonprofit actors in a profit-driven system, NGOs *do* shift understandings of economics and the market economy itself. Reading such things as resistance may allow for new theorizations of NGOs as infiltrating the market system, rather than being infiltrated by it.

On the cultural front, considering NGOs as resistant could also deconstruct assumed national or cultural beliefs. Mynster and Edwards (2014), in their analysis of how one international NGO based its fundraising campaigns in a construction of its identity as more moral than other international organizations, write that this study "illustrates how NGO communication must facilitate organizational legitimacy by constructing a space within which the organization may safely claim the moral (social, cultural, political) high ground" (p. 340). However, I believe there is room to interpret this finding in different manner. Resistance could also be formulated here as the *refusal* of the moral high ground. Resisting the construction of international aid and NGOs as "moral" could lead to productive space for postcolonial invention.

The Mezzo Level: Postcolonial Resistance on an Organizational Scale

To reformulate resistance on the mezzo level of organizational dynamics, I claim that organizational scholars should not assume the existence of organizations, but rather focus ideas of resistance on creation, change, *and* destruction. Spivak's (1999) postcolonial work, in particular, has moved scholars away from a conscious and unified essence of subjecthood at the heart of resistance in individuals, and the same insight should also be applied to organizations. Although Koschmann (2012) pushes organizational communication scholars to move beyond "studying communication *in* nonprofit organizations, [toward] advance[ing] communicative explanations *of* nonprofit organizations" (p. 139), few take this invitation to its furthest extent of positing or rooting for the decline or dissolution of organizations. From a postcolonial perspective, the *existence of the organization itself* must be problematized.

In his tension-centered perspective of nonprofits, Sanders (2012) states that "organizational communication research should theorize the tension between the financial imperatives of the market and the pursuit of a social mission as an ontological feature of nonprofit organizations" (p. 182), Sanders assumes such an ontology is stable insomuch as the organization is assumed to exist. What I would argue is the organizational communication also needs to begin theorizing in such a way as to account for the possibility that resistance could/should lead toward the dissolution of the organization itself, or even the dissolution of the market economy. A robust conceptualization of resistance from a postcolonial perspective should not write off these possibilities. For instance, Dichter, an anthropology Ph.D. and development worker for over 35 years, argues that a focus on—or assumption of—organizational survival often takes primacy in international aid work, to the point where the mission of the organization becomes more centrally about *keeping the organization going* than about *doing the work the organization is supposed to be doing* (Dichter, 2003).

Studies of organizational accountability and legitimacy similarly assume the problem lies within the struggle between being accountable to constituents and constructing a legitimate identity for donors, rather than with the existence of the organization itself. In their study showing how an international NGO models its identity primarily on the beliefs of its donors, Gill and Wells (2014) end their troubling analysis on a quite positive note:

By encouraging [NGOs] to embrace the spirit of alliance—which tends to foreground marginalized voices and dialogic decision making—with donor/volunteer identity, [NGOs] may be able to address postcolonial and feminist concerns in ways that also resonate with donors/volunteers. (p. 48)

Although this would be a great solution for the problem they have presented, it assumes the political problem of neocolonialism lies only with the organization's rhetorical construction of their legitimacy, rather than with the existence of the organization itself, or the NGOs' place within economic systems. What this construction of resistance elides is the need to interrogate whether the organization can ever help *per se*. There is reason to be skeptical (Dichter, 2003).

The Micro Level: Postcolonial Resistance on an Interpersonal Scale

In rethinking resistance in intercultural interpersonal relations of NGOs, I argue that we need to consider those who, consciously or unconsciously, refuse to participate in aid, and the performance of everyday bodily acts. A refusal to participate in international NGOs, donate to them, or be served by them may be a means of resistance. In non-Western communities, this could take the form of those who refuse services provided by the international NGO, or indeed, the refusal to work at the international NGO that ostensibly serves their community.

For example, Dempsey & Sanders (2010) note two problems that arise when work at NGOs is considered inherently meaningful. First, workers are often expected to be willing to work for less than they should because they are contributing to an important cause. Second, it reinforces an idea of NGOs as "sacred space[s] existing apart from the influences of capitalism" (p. 440). Both of these offer paths to underconceptualized forms of resistance in international NGOs. On the micro level, international NGO workers might have a different conceptualization of what meaningful work means, and whether or not NGO work is meaningful *per se*. Thus, by refusing to participate in unpaid labor and self-sacrifice, what might often be taken as an inability to 'see the good that the organization is doing' or 'see the need for the organization'—in short, what Westerners may attribute to the indigenous village worker as laziness, stupidity, or an inability to fix their own problems—may be more productively read as a form of micro-level resistance. Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) make an observation that does not only apply to organizational scholarship when they say:

Diverse voices, if present at all, are still channeled through dominant Western loudspeakers, and Western notions of rationality silence any discussion of emotionality or subjectivity, both of which are crucial elements of diverse organizing practices. (p. 251)

In a similar manner, the opinions and voices of those served by international NGOs are most often refracted through Western "loudspeakers" in a way that should make us re-think how a lack of engagement with international NGOs should be read. Jack, et al. (2011) emphasize that "it is important for organizational scholars to understand the forms of resistance enacted by indigenous groups and communities" (p. 292), which may necessitate questioning the Western assumptions and worker-oriented foundations of our understandings of resistance, as well as engaging with those on the 'other side' of nongovernmental organizations—that is, the "others" being served.

In addition, bodily acts typically dismissed as 'everyday' should also be considered as possibly resistant. As Prasad and Prasad (2003a) describe, since a lot of workplace resistance research stems from Marxist-inspired desires to understand why the revolution against capitalism *did not occur*, much of workplace resistance theory is focused on *impediments* to resistance and change. This implicit focus on revolution, or material change, as the goal or *telos* of resistance then tends to marginalize those forms of resistance that are "everyday" as not "real" resistance (p. 101). Yet, even micro-acts of resistance

can affect NGO operations, and even larger social structures in the long run. For instance, in their essay regarding Islamic perspectives on postcolonial theory, Khan and Koshul (2011) describe how "bodily acts of worship [are seen] as a catalyst for transforming deeply help inner convictions," producing resistant believes and behaviors (p. 316). The idea of "everyday" bodily acts as resistive could provide a new lens through which to recognize and examine resistance in interpersonal organizational relations.

RESISTANCE REWORKED: THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Holvino (2010) argues that "those who claim to represent and speak for others, that is, organizational scholars, must re-examine our/their constructions of 'the other' to reveal, reflexively, what these constructions say about ourselves/themselves" (p. 261). Throughout this essay, I have attempted to reveal the ways in which postcolonial work in organizational studies affects not only the critiques that organizational scholars are able to level at international NGOs, but also the groundings of our own theories, perspectives, and assumptions. As Broadfoot and Munshi (2007) maintain:

When we as scholars unthinkingly adopt the discourse and knowledge of mainstream Euro-American organizational communication scholarship, we potentially absorb, without reflection, a particular way of understanding the world. (p. 264)

In typical analyses of resistance within international NGOs, the Euro-American frameworks underlying the analysis, even when paired with a postcolonial political commitment, still constrain the logics of understanding.

What this essay reveals to organizational communication scholars, using the rather outlying case of international NGOs, are that intercultural power relations should *always* be taken into account in organizational communication work. Shome (1996) claims that under postcolonial theoretical assumptions, "we are all in some way cultural hybrids" (p. 52). Although it is easier to pretend cultural monotony in mono-national corporate spaces, hybrids are ever-present, because organizations are never mono-cultural (Allen, 2007). To assume a mono-cultural frame, even within a mono-national organization, is to reinforce the dominant culture, without examining possibilities for resistance. Thus, "it is no longer possible to conceive of cultures and cultural identities homogenously, for each of us in some way occupies borderland territories" (Shome, 1996, p. 52).

In that case, four implications of a postcolonial reworking of resistance are important to conceptualizing resistance in any and all organizational communication research. First, culture must be considered in all circumstances. In this increasingly globalized society, no organizations exist in a vacuum, nor is work ever unaffected by intercultural employees, venders, customers, or constituents. The importance of cultural considerations cannot be overplayed. Second, instead of focusing on primarily on interactions occurring within the organization itself, multiple levels of analysis should be interwoven for the most complex—and politically savvy—understandings of resistance. Third, organizational scholars should move away from dialectical configurations of power. By developing systems that account for tension as more than a pair of forces, organization communication research can work toward more complex, radically contingent, relational understandings that attempt to situate resistance within a nuanced perspective of the co-constitutive processes that the three levels of analysis have with one another. Finally, formulations of resistance should move away from subject-led conceptualizations that center the conscious activity of

a self-knowing subject. By drawing away from conscious intent as a *necessary* indicator of resistance, spaces are opened for innovative new understandings of resistance, and thus paths to decolonial action.

In this essay, I first examined the (neo)colonial power dynamics found at three levels of international NGO work. Then, I resisted current interpretations and explanations of "resistance" by reworking the concept through a postcolonial perspective. Finally, I brought the preceding two sections together by rethinking theories of resistance according to postcolonial concerns in relation to international NGOs. In conclusion, I drew out theoretical implications for future organizational communication research. This essay is premised on the assumption that "research and scholarship are acts of ethical engagement with the larger world in which we live" (Prasad & Prasad, 2003a, p. 113). By engaging with postcolonial reformulations of resistance, I hope to open avenues for decolonial theoretical work, and lead to empirical studies that question Western perspectives, and the bases of their own assumptions.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

(Neo)colonialism: A term that encompasses both colonialism as the direct physical invasion, occupation, and resource removal of previously indigenous land, and neocolonialism as Western-centric representations of and interactions with other cultures, as well as indirect colonization of economies and resources through economic restructuring and global trade.

Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs): Also known as nonprofits or third sector organizations, these are organizations that do not make money for profit, but instead use donations and volunteers in an attempt to help communities or other people groups solve or attenuate social problems.

Postcolonial Theory: A theoretical tradition that seeks to undermine Western dominance in systems of thought, representation, and international relations through criticism of Western-centric logics, exploration of alternative logics, and interrogation of hybridity, mimicry, and ambiguity in cultural relations.

Power: A contingent and contextually-based system of relations that positions certain peoples, beliefs, and values as dominant to others. Anything having to do with power is *political*.

Resistance: Actions, conscious or unconscious, that operate from within the dynamics of power in an attempt to destabilize inequitable relations, and reform power relations in more just ways.

Western-Centric: Explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious formulations that position Western beliefs, values, logics, and/or people as superior to those of non-Western cultures.