

**Diagnosing a School Board's Interactional Trouble:
Toward a Theory of Blame Reconstruction**

Karen Tracy and Heidi Muller

Communication Department, CB 270

University of Colorado

Boulder, CO 80309

Karen.Tracy@Colorado.edu

muller@ucsu.Colorado.edu

Paper presented to the Rhetorical and Communication Theory Division, 1999 NCA
Conference, Chicago.

**Diagnosing a School Board's Interactional Trouble:
Toward a Theory of Blame Reconstruction**

Abstract

Communication, Craig argues, is and should be a practical discipline: a field whose scholarly work would be helpful in improving the communicative practices it studies. Following explication of Craig's notions of practical theory and communication as a practical discipline, the paper analyzes the interactional trouble in one community's school board meetings. Drawing upon three theories relevant to this school board site -- proposals about argumentative processes, rhetorical action and moral conflict -- we show how each of the theoretical lenses leads to a different diagnosis of the community's "school board problem." The second part of the paper inverts the analytic focus. Based on study of this school board's troubles, we critique the usefulness of the three theories. Finally, in the paper's conclusion, we draw out linkages between problem naming and blame allocation.

Diagnosing a School Board’s Interactional Trouble:

Toward a Theory of Blame Reconstruction

The Blue Ribbon Panel believes that establishing significantly better communications internally and externally is key to a successful and widely respected school system.

In September 1997, the major newspaper in Rocky Mountain¹ County, an affluent community in the Western United States, issued the results of a 13-person task force that had been deliberating for a year about “The Schools We Want.” In inch-high letters, the paper’s Sunday Insight/Opinion Section proclaimed “Communication a top priority.” Directly below, offset in a box outlined in blue, was the above statement. The report, organized as a list of concerns with each reported in italicized print, was followed by instances that illustrated why a concern existed and what the task force recommended.

One key concern was formulated as follows:

Concern: *School board members set an unpleasant tone throughout the district with their destructive divisiveness and sometimes open display of disrespect toward one another, all of which is a barrier to improving communication.*

Noteworthy in the way this concern is formulated is that the school system’s trouble is located in the problematic actions of board members as individual personalities: School board members “set an unpleasant tone” and act with “disrespect.” This diagnosis was not implausible – key players were opinionated and not models of tactfulness -- but it is far from either a complete or a helpful description of the School board’s interactional trouble. Our purposes in this paper are: (1) to consider advantages and disadvantages of formulating interactional trouble in school board meetings one way rather than another,

(2) to identify issues that a close look at school board meetings raises for the theories used to diagnose interactional trouble, and (3) using the analyses in the first part of the paper as exemplars, to offer the beginning of a practical theory of blame reconstruction.

A situation's problems, as many have noted, are not transparent and given but "formulated," described to be one thing or another. That labeling situated interactional trouble is a constructive enterprise few scholars would dispute, yet this is often ignored in research practice. In this paper we draw out the significance of problem formulation, showing how particular problem formulations function as proposals of who or what is to blame and what needs to be changed.

Unlike other arenas of public life where apathy is commonplace (Eliasoph, 1998), school board meetings are frequently sites of high citizen involvement. When decisions affect people's children, particularly if an upcoming decision appears headed in the "wrong" direction, citizens attend meetings and claim the right to be heard. School board meetings, then, are quintessential sites of democracy in action: loosely knit groups of people, with partially shared and partially competing interests, making decisions about how to educate "the children." The content of school board decisions, cumulatively and over time, shapes the character of American society. Even more important than decision content is the character of the decision-making process. In the specifics that comprise the communicative process of school board meetings, democracy is lived out (or challenged). What, then, are the practical and theoretical advantages of conceiving of interactional troubles at school board meetings one way versus another?

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin by describing grounded practical theorizing, the metatheoretical stance that informs our work. Then we provide

background on Rocky Mountain school board meetings, as well as the study's discourse and ethnographic materials and method. The analytic heart of the paper is a consideration of the advantages and limitations of three theoretical lenses for understanding the group's interactional trouble. We consider how each theoretical lens would frame the interactional problems. Then, we look in the opposite direction, considering how this study of Rocky Mountain's School board (one complex case) makes visible conceptual difficulties (problematic assumptions, questionable claims) within each theoretical frame. In the paper's conclusion, we move up a level of abstraction, reframing the school board case as a complex and multi-voiced instance of blame allocation. Based on analysis of the case, we offer several proposals for building a theory of blame reconstruction.

Practical Theorizing

In a series of papers Craig (1989, 1992, 1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Craig & Tracy, 1995) has argued that communication should conceive of itself as a “practical discipline,” a scholarly enterprise committed to developing ideas about how to cultivate the practices it studies. “Practices” is a broad term Craig uses to refer to different kinds of communicative conduct (e.g., teaching, 911 calls) or institutional scenes (e.g., safe houses for battered women, academic colloquia, school board meetings). Some practices, such as teaching, counseling or cross-examining, are highly theorized, existing within developed traditions of oral and written arguments and counter-arguments. Others have received only a small amount of explicit thought. As Craig (1996a p. 472) notes,

if practices are theorized to varying degrees and every practice is theorized to some degree, then no sharp line can be drawn between what is officially called “theory” and the conceptual structures articulated in everyday practical

discourses. Indeed, that there is a continuum between the two such that it is possible for disciplinary and mundane discourses to converge and interpenetrate is crucial to the very possibility of a practical discipline as conceived here. The selective incorporating of theoretical discourses into practical discourses is called 'application.' The selective incorporation of practical discourses into theoretical discourses is called 'grounded practical theory.'

Grounded practical theorizing involves reconstructing a communicative practice at three levels. The first and pivotal level requires characterizing the problems, dilemmas, and puzzles that are intrinsic to a practice. The second level is a technical one that involves specifying the conversational and interaction structuring moves that reflect problems and function as strategies to manage them. Third, is the philosophical level that is concerned with identifying participants' situated beliefs about what are good and right ways for members in different roles to conduct themselves. In the paper's conclusion we offer the start of a grounded practical theory of blame reconstruction. Using the analyses of trouble at Rocky Mountain School Board, developed in the first part of the paper as an extended case of blame reconstruction, we identify dilemmas intrinsic to the practice of labeling interactional problems.

Analysis of the school board's interactional troubles, the first layer of analysis, is also informed by Craig's (1996a, 1996b) ideas about practical theorizing. Inherent in descriptions of a practical discipline and practical theories is the notion of a theory—practice continuum. Theory and practice are not incommensurate discourses as Sandelands (1990) has argued, but, rather, any particular discourse is more or less theoretical and more or less practical. Craig (1996a, p. 466) notes that application of a theory "is not a linear, formal translation of theory into practice but requires tacking back and forth between abstract concepts and the particular situation, reconsidering the

meaning of each until a sufficiently coherent interpretation of both is achieved." Using existing theories to view a practice, we suggest, fits squarely into a reflexive approach to inquiry that is key to a practical discipline. Just as a practical discipline's existing theories may shed light on a focal practice, so too can study of a focal practice lead to better theorizing about the domain to which the theories should be connected.

This study is similar to Papa, Auwal & Singhal's (1995) application of three different kinds of organizational theories to a complex social change process that occurred in rural Bangladesh communities. It differs, however, in its interest in normative practical theorizing. The analysis to be developed brings Van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1993 pragma-dialectical theory, Potter's (1996) rhetorical fact-construction theory, and Pearce and Littlejohn's (1997) theory of moral conflict to examination of the interactional troubles at Rocky Mountain's school board meetings. Drawing upon each theory, we identify the likely diagnosis it would provide of Rocky Mountain's troubles.

We selected these three theories because each framed itself as about one or more of the communicative activities that are key in school board meetings -- argument, talk in public rhetorical sites, disagreement and conflict, and because a diagnosis of interactional trouble could be derived from each theory. In other words, normative evaluations were either built into or strongly implied by the three theories. In addition, each of the theories related to the kinds of communication that was actually visible in the public meetings. For instance, we initially considered functional group decision-making theory (e.g., Gouran, Hirokawa, Julian, & Leatham, 1993) but rejected it because in school board meetings the formulation of problems and decisions, as well as the generating of

solutions, often were carried out by Board officers outside the public meetings, surfacing in meetings as pre-packaged "agenda items."

Background on Rocky Mountain School Board

Rocky Mountain school district serves a population of a quarter of a million people and has in its main city of roughly 100,000 a research university that educates many of the teachers and administrators that staff its schools. The district is geographically diverse, including not only the university city that is its hub but bedroom suburbs and difficult-to-reach mountain towns. More than twenty-five thousand children attend its 56 different schools.

The school board is comprised of seven members, elected for four-year terms, with half of the board up for election every two years. Following each election, the Board selects its president and other officers. In Fall of 1996 the Board decided to televise its bimonthly meetings on a local cable channel, an action taken to foster greater levels of involvement from citizens in the community. Meetings during the observation period frequently involved large numbers of citizens and ran five or more hours.

Meetings occurred bimonthly in a large rectangular room in the school district's main office. School board members are seated on a dais arranged in a semi-circle with each person's full name and office displayed. On one side of the dais is a table where the superintendent of schools and the district's attorney sit; to the other is the meeting's recording secretary, who rings a bell when a citizen has been speaking for two minutes, and the podium where citizens stand to speak to the board. Directly in front of the elevated dais is a long rectangular table where school administrators, teachers or community leaders involved in a particular agenda item will sit when that agenda item

occurs. Behind this table are rows of chairs with seats for about seventy where members of the public and non-presenting personnel sit.

A meeting begins with a call to order, a roll call of the seven board members, and the pledge of allegiance. After the President explains Board procedures and how the public is to participate, the first phase of public participation begins. Up to 25 people make two-minute presentations on any topic other than those that are scheduled on the agenda. This is followed by a report from the superintendent and “Board Communications,” a time when each board member can speak about any events or concerns. Then the Board addresses “action items,” issues to be voted upon at that meeting. At the start of each action item, up to ten members of the public may give two-minute speeches. Next the Board discusses among itself, soliciting information from relevant experts as needed, and takes its vote. After action items, there are “discussion items,” issues for discussion to be voted on in a subsequent meeting. Again, for each item of discussion up to ten citizens could speak before the Board begins a discussion among itself. The amount of public participation varied enormously, ranging from more than fifty citizens speaking at a single meeting to as few as two or three. At the conclusion of the discussion items, a meeting would be adjourned.²

Items about which the Board made decisions ranged from the mundane to the technical, from the routine and highly consensual to the emotional and deeply divisive. Typical decisions were about such things as approving a contract to buy new school busses, changing the medical and dental insurance options for school employees, adding a new school choice option with the funding commitments that went along, adding or deleting a service day for teachers, situating an alternative program in an existing school

that did not have sufficient children enrolled to meet its building capacity, changing graduation requirements, approving the year's budget as well as the main categories and levels of spending, and so on.

Data and Method

Our materials include 33 months³ of videotapes of Rocky Mountain school board Meetings, 18 months under one group of elected officials (our key focus), and fifteen months with another, with three members serving on both boards. Data include about 250 hours of videotapes, and extensive notes from many meetings. Most notes were taken from the live broadcast program but notes also included several months of observation at the school district center. At this point in time, approximately 10 hours of segments from different meetings have been transcribed simply.⁴ Additional materials include: (a) newspaper clippings over the 33 month period, including news stories, letters, and editorials on school board issues; (b) official agendas for most meetings collected at the meetings or downloaded from the school district's homepage; (c) minutes for meetings and a variety of school district policy documents; and (d) campaign pamphlets and handouts from the 1997 election. Other communicative problems examined thus far at Rocky Mountain school board include argumentative strategies during campaigns (Tracy, 1999) and the framing of group decisions (Tracy & Standerfer, forthcoming).

This study blends discourse analytic and ethnographic field methods (see Tracy, 1995) to consider how the communicative problems of RM's school board meetings would be constructed if viewed through these three theoretical frames.

Three Lenses on RM School Board's Interactional Trouble

Lens 1: Meetings as a Site where Insufficient Attention is Given to Talk as Argument

If we posed the question, "What do citizens expect a school board meeting to be like?", it seems probable that the interactional picture that would be offered, at least in broad strokes, would be similar to Van Eemeren et al.'s (1993, 1996) normative model of argumentative discourse. That is, ordinary citizens could be expected to frame School board meetings as places that should encourage discussion of the pros and cons of proposed courses of action, as places where participants would offer reasons to support proposals, and as occasions in which decisions would be "based on the merits of the case, not on the participants' personal stake in any particular standpoint" (1993, p. 28).

Van Eemeren et al. (1993) provide an ideal of argumentative discourse rooted in certain philosophical notions of reasonableness. Their ideal presumes that resolution is pursued by both parties, arguers are roughly symmetrical and that discussion would begin by identifying points of agreement before exploring the merits of competing positions. At the same time, the authors recognize that actual discourses rarely match this ideal. Because people have interests, asymmetries are present, and every situation faces practical time constraints, the ideal is rarely enacted. It is possible and desirable, though, to reconstruct talk as if its central purpose were critical discussion. Such a reconstruction, admittedly a selection, provides a best face for what is being argued. It also makes clear how talk is deviating from the proposed argumentative ideal.

Excerpt 1, a statement from a parent during open public participation, gives an example of a typical citizen comment. A major issue in that night's board meeting was the decision about adding course and credit requirements for high school graduation. The

board's discussion at the previous meeting had revealed that the majority of board members were leaning toward changing the requirement; it had also made visible that many teachers and parents were against the change.

Excerpt 1

Helene: Hi I'm Helene Arrow, the proud mother of twins at RM High School. Our oldest daughter graduated from RM High in 1995 and is currently a sophomore at the University of Southern California. I am deeply concerned tonight. I am concerned about the direction in which the board appears to be moving in. There is an elitism that exists that on this board that's appalling and frightening to me as a parent. It certainly appears that the board is no longer concerned about what's good for all students, but what is good for the few. It certainly doesn't appear to me that the board is concerned about students of color.

((Applause))

Helene: A person. A person that I respect--Betty Jetser [RM principal], addresses these concerns at RM High School. Obviously, the board does not validate her sensitivity of all students because you decide to move her in the middle of the year. And this says to me as a parent, that your agenda has nothing to do with the needs of all students. I am concerned tonight. I am concerned that when you decide to increase graduation requirements without consulting teachers and administrators for carrying out these tasks. I am concerned. I am concerned that a year ago, multicultural education and diversity was a district goal, but now that goal no longer exists. I am concerned. And as a parent of color, I will remain concerned until these issues are resolved. And it is my hope that you will go back to collaborating with the community, valuing our professional staff, and empowering teachers to do what they need to do so our children can be successful. Please, please, let go of your personal agendas. Thank you.

((Big Applause and cheering))

If we work backward from Helene's comment, we could reconstruct her argument as something like, " the board majority is making poor decisions and treating people inappropriately. Her evidence is a set of incidents that illustrate inappropriate conduct. We might also notice that Helene is engaging in a lot of expressives--acts that air strong

negative feelings and acts which van Eemeren et al. (1993, p. 29) argue should "play no role in critical discussion. . . . [these acts] are not argumentatively relevant "

In many ways, the Rocky Mountain Task Force's analysis of the problem draws on this latter assessment. Putting the newspaper's description of the "disrespect" members show each other into the theoretical language of argumentation, we might conclude that the interactional trouble at RM results because key players engage in ad hominen attack. Furthermore, if participants doing ad hominen attacks were to refrain, the quality of the discussion would be significantly improved.

An argument frame would do more than re-label the trouble with a more technical vocabulary; it would make apparent another facet of the problem. In particular, assuming the suitability of critical discussion as a frame for school board meetings leads us to notice an interesting *absence* in the meeting talk: the lack of argumentative meta-talk. To put it another way, in comments from public participants or board member, there were few signs that people saw the talking they were doing as making arguments. It was rare to hear people say, " I have two *reasons* for favoring this proposal, " What is the *evidence?*", "What would you *conclude?*" "On this *issue*, my *viewpoint* is . . .", and so on. Rather what people did (citizen participants and board members) is that they described a state of affairs and the response that was sensible given the explicated state of affairs.

An issue was rarely stated explicitly, and frequently it was hard to give a label to an inferred issue. To the degree that an issue could be inferred, it tended to change across speakers on the "same" agenda item. Excerpt 1 gives an example of the invisibility of argument as the frame for talking. Noteworthy, however, is that while we can apply an

argument frame to her talk there is no sense that she is using this frame. The language she uses to formulate "her argument" shows no recognition that members of the community have different positions regarding board members' conduct, nor that others would (actually did) assign alternative meanings to the actions she references. There is no sense that Helene sees herself as making an argument on an issue. Rather, we are left with a strong sense that she sees herself as describing the ways things are. Helene's comment is typical of how RM participants talked about controversial issues.

One way to frame Rocky Mountain's interactional trouble, then, is to see it as resulting from people's inattention to framing what they are doing as making arguments. Because people did not use the language of argument (i.e., position, viewpoint, reason, evidence, issue) in their talk, it was hard to see what they were doing as rational deliberation, and easy to see it as nothing more than personal attacks. Using the language of argument, regardless of actual quality of the arguments made, seems one way to diffuse the interactional trouble. Disagreements in which a speaker labels what another has said as "not a convincing position for these reasons," implicitly conveys greater respect than "describing" another's awful actions. The language of argument creates emotional distance, a space between talk and persons, that in turn is likely to decrease the sense that a person is engaged in an ad hominem attack. If we use Van Eemeren and his colleagues (1993) theory of critical discussion, then, we would diagnosis Rocky Mountain's interactional trouble as resulting from so many participants failing to frame their talk as making an argument.

Lens 2: School Board Meetings as Normal Rhetorical Action

A rather different view of Rocky Mountain's "interactional trouble" is developed if we look at the meetings as an obvious site for rhetorical action. In his book, **Representing Reality**, Jonathan Potter (1996) begins with an assumption that all talk is rhetorical. Given this assumption, he poses two questions, "First, how are descriptions produced so that they will be treated as factual . . . Second, how are these factual descriptions put together in ways that allow them to perform particular actions?" (p. 1). Potter proposes that conflicting descriptions of a situation are not a result of individuals presenting representations of different underlying realities, but are rhetorical constructions. If a statement is taken to be a "mere fact," it is because the speaker has rhetorically crafted the description to appear as such. Potter offers ways of analyzing people's describing so as to uncover a description's rhetorical moves. He also identifies conversational strategies communicators use to undermine alternate descriptions and bolster their own versions.

"Describing," he notes, "involves a set of issues to do with categorizing into classes of things formulating as something, providing detail or not, making judgments and so on." (Potter, 1996; p. 65). It is through looking at what particular details are included in a description, and how the details are woven together that rhetorical construction becomes visible. Moreover, it is important to recognize that description is always done for a purpose: most typically to display self's views as reasonable and contrasting other's views, frequently not explicitly mentioned, as unreasonable.

What is striking about this theoretical lens is its goodness of fit for the talk at the Rocky Mountain school board meetings. This is what participants seem to be doing in

their talk. Consider another parent's comment at the meeting where the vote was taken about changing high school graduation requirements.

Excerpt 2

I'm a parent of three children. Um. I don't think it's [*reference to the upcoming vote about graduation requirements*] being decided by amateurs. I voted for you guys and I trust you. And there's a heck of a lot more of us out there. And I'm so disappointed in so many of these teachers that should be wanting more change for my children instead of less. ((big sigh)) Okay, I'm a parent and I support you in recommending the slight, and it is a little increase in graduation requirements. I really do wish it could be more (a few lines deleted) We are an educated city. So, why do these teachers want our children to be less educated? I don't know. The requirements are a minimum of what we should expect. I have an excerpt from the introduction to the great books chapter 6 titled 'Education for All' and I think this applies: "In education for example whenever a proposal is made that looks toward increased intellectual effort on the part of the students, teachers will always say that the students cannot do the work." My observation leads me to think that what this usually means is that the teachers cannot or will not do the work that the suggested change requires. When in spite of the opposition, the teacher, of the teachers, the change has been introduced the students, in my experience, have always responded nobly.' Thanks you for thinking of our children and for wanting more from them and not less.

The problem described in this parent's comment, to put it colloquially, is "lazy teachers." Making even this "slight," "little change" -- "I really do wish it could be more" -- will require teachers to work harder, a state, that this parent implies, is the only reason that could make sense of why teachers "want our children to be less educated."

This description becomes even more interesting when looked at alongside the statement made by the earlier parent (see Excerpt 1). In Helene's statement, she described a situation in which the school board was acting in isolation from the community and was promoting elitism at the cost of diversity and consideration of the educational needs of *all* students. Board members were pursuing their own "personal agendas" and were not considering the welfare of the children. Juxtaposing these two parents' descriptions of

"the facts" bearing on changing graduation requirements gives evidence of Potter's claim that talk is inevitably strategic and rhetorical.

It might be argued that we have selected an obviously contentious issue, and that this kind of rhetorical crafting displayed in these moments would not be as visible if a decision involved agreement about a problem. Consider the comments made on the problem of how to reduce the length of board meetings to a reasonable number of hours. There was unanimous agreement among board members that meetings were much too long. In an attempt to shorten the meetings, the superintendent had offered a proposal to amend the order of activities at meetings. It was proposed that following public participation and the superintendent remarks, the board would move immediately to its discussion and voting items. The open-ended board commentary time, currently preceding discussion and voting, was being proposed as an activity to move to the very end. Board commentary was a time when each board member could discuss any issue he or she saw as needing attention in the district. Official rules required members to limit themselves to five minutes apiece but board comments often ran as long as 45-60 minutes. Not infrequently, a meeting would have been in session two hours before the group arrived at the discussion and voting items. Consider the following two excerpts taken from the discussion of the proposed agenda change. The first comment comes from a board member who typically voted with the majority (5 members) when there was a controversial decision, and the second comes from one of the two members who was usually in the minority position when votes split.

Excerpt 3 (Majority Board Member's Comment)

Ah today I'll give you example. I timed us. Uh one member spent ten minutes, another thirteen, another four, Madame President nothing, four and a half minutes, one minute myself, and two minutes. But with everything came between, and I'm not trying to blame anybody because at various times various valued members of the board transgress. I, last week we had were treated towards twenty-five and I think a half minute speech. Previous meeting somebody else had something then another member had twenty-nine minutes. I won't point du du du du du the finger. (several lines deleted) After all we agreed that we will have three to five minutes.

Excerpt 4 (Minority Board Member's Comment)

I think it's real important to hear from all board members. And I see that uh I realize that this could also change after the election, that whatever is decided by this board now, a new board could decide uh differently. So if this is what is going to work for you all then uh we'll see how it goes. But I really object to it. And I have asked several times for an agenda item to be on and I assumed it would be added back at the very beginning as a discussion item uh the next meeting. And that did not happen. Uh here we are another three or four times later. And hopefully once you've removed something from the agenda because of time you will consider fair and equal uh respect to have those topics put back on again at the next meeting.

We would highlight just a few features of these remarks. First, the majority board member's mention of "valued members transgressing" the five minute rule are not random mentions of board members but spotlight minority members' talking. For anyone who had watched or been there in the meetings noted, it was not a difficult task to attach names to the big numbers. In essence, the majority board member pointed his finger at the two minority members while denying that he was doing so. We have not timed statements from board members but our observational impression is that this member's implication is accurate: the two minority members frequently gave long comments. These lengthy commentaries undoubtedly contributed to the meeting's length. However, although everyone agreed that the meetings were too long, the minority board member's comment, even recognizing its rambling quality, draws attention to another function of the proposed

change: Further silencing the minority members' dissenting voices and making it even harder for them to have input into "this board's" decisions. To state in other words, time limits may be unfair, and will certainly be experienced as unfair, when a party disagrees with the majority direction. Another way, then, to make sense of the excessive length of the meetings -- vaguely alluded to in the minority member's comment -- was to see them as the result of the majority's unwillingness to take account of others' views, a state that resulted in the many teachers and parents, as well as the minority board members, feeling a strong need to express themselves at length in meetings.

Viewing school board meetings as the playing out of normal rhetorical processes helps us to make sense of many of the particularities of talk at Rocky Mountain's meetings. Yet, in normalizing these kinds of rhetorical activities -- arguing it is what people do regularly and normally any time they have different interests -- it ignores the community's established perception that meetings had serious interactional trouble. Potter's theory is seeking to describe how people talk; he is not interested in how people ought to conduct themselves. Yet we would argue that just as normative theories can be inspected for how well they describe the communicative world, descriptive theories can be viewed for their embedded normative stance. That is, if a theory does not make a normative stance explicit, an implicit one can be identified. If an activity is framed as "normal," we suggest, an implication is that people need to expect it, not see it as abnormal, not get upset or seriously troubled when it occurs. "Normal activities" are things people need to take in stride. Viewing Rocky Mountain's meetings as normal would lead us to diagnose the interactional trouble as resting in community members' undue sensitivities. Simply put, it is people's expectation that decisions involving

differences should be conducted pleasantly and without turmoil that is the problem. In everyday parlance, the interactional trouble at Rocky Mountain meetings is explained as arising because participants are too thin-skinned.

Consider now a third interpretation of Rocky Mountain's school board's interactional trouble.

Lens 3: School Board Meetings as a Site of Moral Conflict

Moral conflicts, Pearce and Littlejohn (1997, p. 6) state, “occur on issues such as which textbooks to use in elementary schools, whether creation science should be taught, whether abortion should be legal . . . how justice should be served.” Moral conflict is conflict in which there are sides, and each side regards the other as morally reprehensible.

That which each side holds most sacred compels it to oppose the other, and to the extent that the other resists *and justifies that resistance within its own moral vocabulary*, each is compelled to redouble its efforts to construct, eliminate and disempower the other. The results are familiar patterns of reciprocated diatribe, in which each side rudely tells the other what is wrong with it. Useful discussion of the issues becomes a casualty of the bickering (p. 14).

Whether the RM school board meetings reflected a “moral conflict” in the full-blown sense -- incompatible, incommensurate worlds – is difficult to say. Clearly, though, there were “sides” and reciprocated diatribe. On controversial issues, votes routinely divided into a 5-2 majority-minority grouping where the same people were in each group across a variety of issues. Much of the conflict revolved around the meaning of “academic excellence.” As Pearce and Littlejohn note, “That participants in moral conflict use different languages and symbols is a relatively minor part of the problem. The greater problem is that they use the same language and symbols in incompatible ways” (p. 7).

Two excerpts from letters to the editor evidence that citizens in the community were framing the interactional trouble along moral lines. If a citizen supported a side, that side was a repository of fair and reasonable thinking; if a citizen opposed the side, those people were vicious, nasty and unreasonable. Consider two citizens' comments about the board majority.

Excerpt 5

The incumbents [all members of the above mentioned majority] have made hard choices striking a careful balance among the interests and goals of *all* segments of the community including teachers and administrators, employers and college professors who receive the products of our schools, student families who are customers of the system, and the taxpayers who foot the bill.

Excerpt 6

The current RM school board is so deeply divided and torn by conflict that it cannot operate effectively. Majority members are rude and inconsiderate and the board meetings are tempestuous. The conflict has already caused one board member to resign. On the face of it, it may be difficult to see what the conflicts are about. Both sides embrace 'academic excellence' and seem sincere in wanting to improve our schools. The discord is the direct result of the policies and behavior of the radical board majority. Their approach to educational 'reform' is inherently destructive and harmful to our schools . . . They seem to view teachers and educators as opponents rather than allies. They have divided the community.

Viewing RM's interactional trouble as moral conflict would lead us to grant that each side has legitimate points to make. "How can we facilitate the two sides talking to each other so they are able to hear what is reasonable in the position of the other?" is the way we would frame the problem. Such a framing would lead us to examine how the school board meeting talk itself is structured and consider how that structure might be affecting one party's ability "to hear" what is reasonable in the other's position.

This frame enables us to notice a number of interaction structuring choices that the RM school board has made which seem to contribute to the difficulties: the resulting practices that seemingly encourage escalation of strong negative feelings. Consider two

practices. On any agenda item up to 10 citizens could speak before the board began its discussion. For several months of observation the first ten people to sign up got to speak. One consequence of allowing whoever got there first to speak was that the views of a group that arrived early and in mass (7-8 parents and teachers from a single school) would get more airing. To address that problem, the board introduced a rule that required that five people could speak on the “pro” side of an issue and five could speak on the “con” side. The difficulty with this arrangement was that it forced people’s views into an antagonistic stance. Some issues were compatible with the format, but many were not. Citizens often had complex nuanced opinions that recognized competing values. The participation format, however, required them to package what they had to say in a way that fit the side they signed up to speak on. This structural practice contributed to the building of “sides” and further polarization of the conflict.

A second practice that exacerbated the conflict was an action introduced by the board for the explicit purpose of decreasing expressions of hostility. At the start of every meeting after the roll call and pledge were completed and before public participation the board president read the following statement:

Excerpt 7

We are glad to hear from the public and look forward to receiving your comments. The board has unanimously resolved, however, that it cannot tolerate personal attacks upon board members, administrators, teachers or staff. We must all encourage and insist upon a more civil public discourse.

What is the message of this message? On its surface, it would seem to be setting up ground rules for people to act civilly — clearly a good thing. Yet we would argue it actually promoted its opposite. By reading such a statement at the start of each meeting — an unusual event in itself — the occasion was established as one where hostility and incivility was expected to be rampant, thus the need for the statement. Furthermore, the

statement frames the cause of these difficulties as being in the members of the “public” who speak to the board. For citizens to be reprimanded before they have expressed themselves, we would suggest, is likely to heighten antagonisms and further polarize opinions. On the few occasions where board members verbally charged a citizen with violating this expectation, it became a conflict between the two as to whether the presenter’s comment was “really” a personal attack.

Viewing RM's interactional trouble as moral conflict leads us away from assessing whose opinions were right or wrong, reasonable, or deserving of blame. Instead, Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) draw our attention to the structure of interaction, and encourage a consideration of the kinds of relationships and patterns of communication that interactional structures may be promoting or discouraging.

From the Practice of School Board Meetings to Theoretical Critique

We have looked at the interactional trouble that occurred at Rocky Mountain school board meetings using three theoretical lenses. Each has led to a different diagnosis of the trouble and the best way out of it: Van Eeemeren et al. (1993) led us to see RM's trouble as participants' failure to frame their talk as making arguments; Potter's theory (1996) led us to see the trouble as a result of participants' excessive sensitivity to doing conflict; Pearce and Littlejohn (1997) led us to see Rocky Mountain meetings as involving a deadlocked conflict in which issues of right/wrong and blame need to become secondary.

From our perspective, each diagnosis and remedy for the trouble at RM's school board captures "a truth" and a useful direction for change. Based on our extended observation we do think RM's meetings would be improved if: (1) the structures for

participation were changed to de-emphasize "sides," (2) participants (board members and citizens) developed thicker skins, recognizing that expressing opinions on controversial issues inevitably involves the use of morally-loaded talk, and (3) all participants did conversational work to recognize that they were deliberating about issues that others saw differently. In sum, each theory sheds light on RM's problems. Consider now what theoretical issues this study of Rocky Mountain School Board meetings raise for the three theories.

Van Eemeren et al.'s (1993) normative model offers an ideal for a pure and abstracted kind of talk. In the world, however, critical discussions do not exist as kinds of situations. Rather, actual talk occasions will be school board meetings, divorce mediation sessions, classroom discussions, candidate debates, and so on. In these contexts, critical discussion often will be an important, valued and legitimate activity, but almost never will it be the only one.

In school board meetings, for instance, there is a larger communicative frame within which discussion of particular issues usually occurs. That frame is a political one that recognizes that key participants (board members) are elected officials who will be held accountable for their decisions and evaluated in the next election. If that frame is reasonable, which we believe it is, then it follows that some of the talk at school board meetings, reasonably, will be addressing the general effectiveness, fairness, and so on of the key participants' actions. School boards are also ongoing groups of people that work with each other over extended periods of time. As such, it seems desirable that a communicative ideal of school board meetings would include recognizing that routine talk needs to attend to people's face wants (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Moreover, school

board meetings, are places where individuals (i.e., parents, administrators, and board members) -- have different rights to speak. These different rights, we would argue, are not necessarily flaws -- the real world falling short of the ideal -- but are reasonable and desirable features for this kind of talk occasion.

This study of RM's school board, then, makes visible a problem in van Eemeren et al.'s normative model. Their theory offers an ideal for a kind of situation that never exists: there are no situations in which critical discussion is the only thing that matters. Actual communication occasions, like school board meetings, not only do take account of multiple goals, but should. Communication theories, we believe should consider what ought to be as well as what is. Yet for a critique of a communicative practice to be maximally useful, the ideals in a theory need to be situated, recognizing the multiple concerns that, legitimately, should be at play in the specific talk occasion. We need a normative models for school board meetings, classroom discussions, and candidate debates, not "critical discussion."

Potter's (1996) theoretical frame, as noted earlier, is a descriptive one, attuned to characterizing how talk accomplishes aims for communicators. It is also a "good" description -- accounting for many particularities of school board talk. In seeking to avoid an evaluative stance, Potter's theoretical account normalizes what is being described. This normalizing impulse, we suggested earlier, has merit. In many situations, including RM's school board meetings, overall communicative conduct is likely to be improved by recognizing that when people have a stake in an issue, they will talk in ways that present their own views as reasonable and others as not. Increasing people's tolerance of this kind of conversational move, we think, encourages an interpretive,

evaluative generosity -- we all do it when we care about an issue! People need to be tolerant of each other's tendency to do this.

At the same time, not everything that is, ought to be. Some things deserve changing. A world in which there was no space for something different than what is would appall most people. In the RM school district there was a widely shared perception that something was wrong with the communication at the school board meetings. The community sensed that whatever was occurring in these meetings went well beyond "normal" expression of disagreement; they judged the level of interactional trouble to be excessive. We agree. The interactional trouble at RM meetings may have been exacerbated by thin-skinned individuals, but there were structural and expressive patterns that were destructive. Potter's theoretical frame offers no way to sort reasonable rhetorical crafting from that that is morally repugnant, a judgment communicators are routinely called upon to make.

A second criticism that study of RM makes visible -- a point that numerous theorists have made (e.g., Lannamann, 1991) -- is that seeking to be "objective" implicitly bolsters the status quo, further advantaging existing arrangements of power. Sometimes existing power relationships are reasonable; other times they are not. Communication theories need to take seriously their inevitable connection to the everyday world. As Craig (1995b) notes,

Communication is not a set of objective facts just simply "out there" to be described and explained. Ideas about communication disseminated by researchers, teachers, and other intellectuals circulate through society and participate in social processes that continually influence and reshape communication practices. Our choice, as interpersonal scholars, is not ultimately *whether* to participate in those processes but *how* to participate. We should be

asking not just what communication *is*, but also what it *should* be. If we're going to help make it, let's at least try to make it better. (p. ix)⁵

Finally, consider the issues this study of RM school board raises for Pearce and Littlejohn (1997). Similar to Van Eemeren et al., Pearce and Littlejohn's theory is a normative one, suggesting what ought to be, as well as what is. Their theoretical frame especially draws our attention to structural features of communication that may contribute to conflicts getting worse: Who talks to whom? About what? When and where? Is a neutral third party present? Moreover, encouraging people to pursue "good argument," Pearce and Littlejohn claim, often yields undesirable results, escalating other-blaming and impassioned statements about the rightness of one's own view.

In giving participation structures focal attention, Pearce and Littlejohn's (1997) theoretical lens provides a helpful counter-weight to the individualistic actor-focused theories dominant among interpersonal communication scholars. At the same time their theory has a serious shortcoming. Labeling a situation a "moral conflict," puts the issue of managing relationships and feelings among people center stage, and diverts attention from the particular substantive issues that are being disputed. Issues at school boards, such as whether graduation requirements should be changed, whether to select a certain textbook series, the policy the district is to take toward advertising, and so on deserve careful thought and talk. The issues are significant items in their own right, and following discussion the group *will* make a decision. We see it as desirable that these decisions be shaped by the "merits of the case" and good reasons. This is not to argue that argument quality should be the only factor, but it is to recognize its ongoing importance for school board meetings. We think it crucial that the label "moral conflict" be applied

to actual groups in a highly conservative manner. To apply the label too quickly encourages a group to turn its gaze inward when it should be giving its attention to deliberating about the particular issues for which it is officially responsible.

To summarize, in the first part of the paper we showed how three different theories contributed to creating a multi-faceted and useful analysis of the difficulties at Rocky Mountain's school board. In this section, we looked in the other direction, showing how in-depth study of this practice made visible dimensions for theoretical critique. Based on analysis of this case, we advance some initial thoughts about the content of a practical theory of blame allocation.

Toward a Practical Theory of Blame Reconstruction

Although the process of accounting for problems has been extensively studied (e.g., Antaki, 1994; Benoit, 1994; Buttny, 1993; Cody & McLaughlin, 1985), there have been only a few studies considering how problems get named (e.g., Morris, 1988). Names for problems, we have shown in this analysis, carry "blame pointers." That is, when an interactional trouble is identified, it directs gaze toward (or away from) individuals, conversational practices, or design features of an institutional situation. In a nutshell, naming problems shapes who or what gets blamed and what kinds of actions are treated as solutions.

Given the consequentiality of problem naming, how might problem labeling best proceed? Based on analysis of RM school board meetings, we offer two suggestions. First, we assume the need to label problems starts with one or more people in a group feeling dissatisfied with how activities are occurring. When this happens, it is important for the involved people to step back and ask, "To what degree is what's going on here

deserving of the label of 'problem,' versus a normal, reasonable part of seeking to accomplish a difficult goal?" Reflecting about what are reasonable expectations for the activity at hand, then, is a critical first step to problem naming.

Second, assuming that some or all of the trouble in an activity seems more than just unreasonable expectations from one party or another, then a second issue is to locate the causes of the interactional trouble. Is the problem to be found in particular individuals and the choices for which they are responsible, and/or in features of the situation? In diagnosing interactional trouble, we think it desirable to consider non-psychological, non-individual diagnoses of a problem before attributing a difficulty to be one or more problematic individuals. We regard this order of reflecting about the character of problems -- first consider institutional structures and conversational practices, then individual agents -- important given the tendency in American society (Bellah, Madsen, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Carter, 1998) to locate problems in individuals. Put another way, a useful theory of reconstructing blame would be one that takes account of typical cultural biases. An implication of this, then, is that in cultures where individual agency is less foregrounded, a theory of desirable reflective action about problem formulation would be different than this one. In arguing for the importance of considering participation structures and existing conversational norms before blaming individuals, we do not want to rule out the reasonableness of locating problems in individuals. Key individuals often are responsible for setting participation structures in place and shaping expressive norms in undesirable directions. Under certain circumstances, the best way to solve a problem will be to change the individual who has responsibility. Nonetheless, we think that blaming individuals for problematic situations is done too quickly and with

insufficient thought to other important contributors: key individuals often are as captive to existing structures and expressive norms as others are.

In addition, in assessing the relevance of factors other than persons, we regard it as valuable to think about both participation structures (who can talk when? about what? how many turns? Are restrictions on expressive forms such as just questions or just assertions warranted?) and forms of expression (e.g., the use of argumentative terms, or frequently used metaphors). Taking account of a wider range of labels for problems, seems a useful first development in a practical theory of blame reconstruction. By making visible that problem formulation is a decision rather than a straightforward starting point, an important step in assigning blame and responsibility becomes open to reflection.

References

- Antaki, C. (1994). Explaining and arguing: The social organization of accounts. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bellah, R.N., Madsen, W.M., Swidler, A., Tipton, S.M. (1985). Habits of the heart. NY: Harper and Row.
- Benoit, W. L. (1995). Accounts, excuses, and apologies: A theory of image restoration strategies. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Buttyn, R. (1993). Social accountability in communication. London: Sage.
- Carter, S. L. (1998). Civility: Manners, morals and the etiquette of democracy. NY Basic.
- Cody, M. J. & McLaughlin, M. L. (1985). Models for the sequential construction of accounting episodes: Situational and interactional constraints on message selection and evaluation. In R.L. Street & J.N. Cappella (Eds.), Sequence and pattern in communicative behaviour (pp. 50-69). London: Edward Arnold.
- Craig, R. T. (1989). Communication as a practical discipline. In B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B.J. O'Keefe, & E. Wartella (Eds.), Rethinking communication; Volume 1; Paradigm issues (pp. 97-122). Newbury Park CA: Sage.
- Craig, R. T. (1992). Practical communication theory and the pragma- dialectical approach in conversation. In F. H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J.A. Blair, & C. A. C.A. Willard (Eds.), Perspectives and Approaches. (pp. 173-182). Amsterdam: International Centre for the Study of Argumentation.
- Craig, R. T. (1995a). Applied communication research in a practical discipline. In K. Cissna (Ed.), Applied communication in the twentieth century (pp. 147-156). Norwood, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Craig, R. T. (1995b). Forward. In W. Leeds-Hurwitz (Ed.) Social approaches to communication (pp. v-ix). New York: Guilford.
- Craig, R.T. (1995c). The normativity of practical theory: Two approaches. In F.H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J. A. Blair, & C.A. Willard (Eds.), Perspectives and Approaches (pp. 173-182). Amsterdam: International Centre for the Study of Argumentation.
- Craig, R. T. (1996a). Practical-theoretical argumentation. Argumentation, 10, 461-474.
- Craig, R. T. (1996b). Practical theory: A reply to Sandelands. Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 26, 65-79.
- Craig, R. T., & Tracy, K. (1995). Grounded practical theory: The case of intellectual discussion. Communication Theory, 5, 248-272.

Eliasoph, N. (1998). Avoiding politics: How Americans produce apathy in everyday life. Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press.

Gouran, D. S., Hirokawa, R. Y., & Leatham, G. B. (1993). The evolution and current status of the functional perspective on communication in decision-making and problem-solving groups. In S. A. Deetz (Ed.), Communication yearbook 16 (pp. 573-600). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lannamann, J. W. (1991). Interpersonal communication research as ideological practice. Communication Theory, 1, 179-203.

Morris, G. H. (1988). Finding fault. Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 7, 1-26.

Papa, M. J., Auwal, M. A., & Singhal, A. (1995). Dialectic of control and emancipation in organizing for social change: A multitheoretic study of the Grameen bank in rural Bangladesh. Communication Theory, 5, 189-223.

Pearce, W. B. (1995). A sailing guide for social constructionists. In W. Leeds-Hurwitz (Ed.) Social approaches to communication (pp. 88-113). New York: Guilford.

Pearce, W. B., & Littlejohn, S. (1997). Moral conflict: When social worlds collide. Thousand Oaks, CA.

Potter, J. (1996). Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction. London: Sage.

Sandelands, L. E. (1990). What is so practical about theory? Levin revisited. Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 20, 235-262.

Tracy, K. (1995). Action-implicative discourse analysis. Journal of Language and Social Psychology, 14, 195-215.

Tracy, K. (1999). The usefulness of platitudes in arguments about conduct. Proceedings of the 4th ISSA Conference on Argumentation (pp.). Amsterdam: Sic Sat.

Tracy, K., & Standerfer, C. (forthcoming). Decisioning: Reconceptualizing group decision-making. In L. Frey (Ed.), Group communication in context: Studies of natural groups (2nd Edition). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

van Eemeren, F. H., Grootendorst, R., & Henkemans, F. (1996). Fundamental of argumentation theory: A handbook of historical backgrounds and contemporary developments. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

van Eemeren, F. H., Grootendorst, R., Jackson, S., & Jacobs, S. (1993). Reconstructing argumentative discourse. Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press.

Notes

¹ “Rocky Mountain County” is the name we give to the school district we study. Whether a pseudonym is needed, or even desirable, is debatable. The details of the case will make the community immediately recognizable to anyone to whom it is familiar. Moreover, the discourse materials we analyze are entirely public: community-televised school board meetings and articles and letters from local papers. We have changed name and place references for two main reasons: The primary one is because our interest is in conversational moves and communicative structuring practices rather than individual people and institutions. Changing names creates a larger space between practices and people, even though many identities would be recoverable for readers linked to the community. Second, people vary as to how well the descriptor of “public figure” fits their profile. School board members and the Superintendent clearly do, but individual parents, teachers, and principals do so less well, and seem deserving of the guarantee of privacy regularly extended to participants in ethnographic and discourse research.

² The format described was the one that was in place for the majority of the 18 months of the focal board. Rules for public participation and the ordering of agenda items were changed several times over the 30 month observation period..

³ In the early stages we did audiotaping. Roughly 20% of the tapes are in audiotape form only.

⁴ Attention was given to capturing exact words, word repairs, phrase restarts, vocalized particles (uhm , uh), but not to vocal intonation, pausing or turn timing.

⁵ The volume was addressed to interpersonal communication researchers and in the quote several references to communication actually said “interpersonal communication.”