

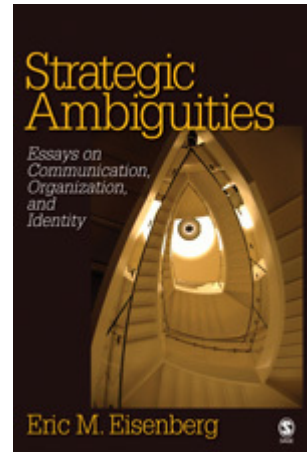
Eric M. Eisenberg, **Strategic Ambiguities: Essays on Communication, Organization and Identity**, Sage Publications, Inc., 2006, 328 pp., \$68.50 (hardcover), \$42.75 (paperback).

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Eric Eisenberg's book is a collection of his essays on the topic of strategic ambiguity. Drawing primarily from the works of Weick, Eisenberg argues that ambiguous communication is a force for individual and social transformation. Many of the essays reflect a structuralist view, emphasizing the role of language in identity formation and in sense making. The essays are arranged in chronological order, from Eisenberg's 1984 article setting out the argument for the significance of strategic ambiguity to his 2006 essay analyzing how Weick has influenced the field of organizational communication. Part 1 outlines the argument against the academic trend toward increasing clarity and openness for effective communication, and for the efficacy of ambiguity in communication as an organizing force. Part 2 is composed of a series of articles addressing practical implications of strategic ambiguity in relation to both the individual and to organizational change. Part 3 analyzes the connection between strategic ambiguity and Weick's theories of sensemaking and enactment in greater depth. In tying together this body of work, Eisenberg attempts to move beyond the topic of strategic ambiguity to a universal theme of non-attachment — not only to mainstream academic theories, but to broader ideologies, beliefs, and rigid interpretations of one's identity. This theme reflects an expansive view of the significance of ambiguous communication in terms of meaning-making and the appreciation for different ideas and worldviews.



The first section of the book begins with an article from early in Eisenberg's career arguing against the predominant view that successful organizational communication and organizational dynamics improve in relation to the level of clarity and openness in communication. In this article, Eisenberg argues that strategic ambiguity can facilitate change by both shifting interpretations of central metaphors of the organization, and by developing interpersonal relationships that function effectively within an organizational environment. Eisenberg does not argue that ambiguity should replace data or accurate information, but rather that valuing ambiguity means appreciating different interpretations of meaning, which he argues is what naturally occurs in daily life, in both business and interpersonal relationships.

In Part 2, Eisenberg provides examples with practical implications of how different interpretations of meaning can lead to organizational change. For example, Chapter 6, "Miscommunication in Organizations," outlines four approaches to the study of miscommunication: the classical structuralist, the pragmatic, human relations, and critical theory. Eisenberg concludes that the starting point of "miscommunication" may be misleading because there is no set definition of this term. Instead, this concept can be viewed and analyzed not as "miscommunication," but as a range of valid but disparate

contexts for communication. Chapter 7, "Dialogue as Democratic Discourse," uses Giddens' (1979) language of structuration and Weick's (1995) theory of equivocality to analyze strategic ambiguity and the influence of research on organizations. Eisenberg analyzes how academics have studied hierarchies and interdependencies in bureaucratic and democratic organizational systems by using Giddens' theory of structuration. As in Part 1, some of Eisenberg's essays are critical of academic approaches to the study of organizational communication. For example, the 1995 essay on how to improve interorganizational dialogue (Chapter 8) targets educational scholars and practitioners. In this essay, Eisenberg argues that effective interorganizational cooperation means more than just reaching a consensus. Instead, a greater emphasis should be placed on cultivating ideas and relationships between different organizations to create coordinated action "in the explicit absence of agreement" (p. 142).

Heavily influenced by Weick, Eisenberg's anthology explores how strategic ambiguity relates to Weick's concepts of enactment, equivocality, and sense making. In Part 3, as in Parts 1 and 2, Eisenberg begins with a critique of other theories in the field of organizational communication and behavior, but here he also highlights the positive impact of Weick (pp. 225-226). A theme in the Part 3 essays is the argument that ambiguity and multiple meanings are not communication failures. Instead, Eisenberg emphasizes a common sense observation based on personal experience that total openness in communication is not only impossible, but "chimerical and naïve" (p. 291). Eisenberg ties this anthology together with the final chapter, "Karl Weick and the Aesthetics of Contingency," by directly analyzing Weick's theories of enactment, equivocality, and sensemaking, as well as Weick's appreciative inquiry approach to academic writing. Here, Eisenberg projects his view of Weick as an iconoclast in the field of organizational communication, arguing that "Weick may turn out to be the most radical scholar of them all" (p. 285). This concluding sentence reflects a panegyric appreciation for Weick and furthers the underlying theme of non-attachment to mainstream theories and ideas.

Organizing the collection of essays chronologically is effective in demonstrating the progression of Eisenberg's ideas and approaches to the analysis of strategic ambiguity and organizational communication over the course of his career. This structure demonstrates how his research and ideas have evolved in relation to — or at times, in reaction to — others in this field. However, the subdivision of the book into three parts, while convenient, is not always an effective structure. Since the articles are in chronological order, some of the chapters deviate from the purported themes of the section. For example, not all chapters in Part 2 reflect a major theme of the section, relating theory and practice. In Chapter 7, "Dialogue as Democratic Discourse," Eisenberg critiques an academic study of communication practices in democratic organizing using structuration theory; he does not directly address political organizations or other practical examples. This essay better reflects the themes of Part 1, emphasizing Eisenberg's academic challenge against conventional theory.

Though the essays tend to repeat similar theoretical themes and arguments, the stylistic approach in each essay often varies. This variety in both the style and subject matter of the essays makes the book an interesting read. For example, in Part 2, Eisenberg moves between a critical, academic style of writing, to a narrative style in the analysis of a hiring process for a university provost; and a brief chapter consisting of the author's poetry. Upon reading the chapter consisting of poems, one first wonders if this is necessary, or perhaps if this adds to the author's underlying argument because the poems are so

unexpected and open to interpretation. However, the poems are introduced by an earnest forward reflecting the reasons why they were written, as well as how this use of language relates to the thematic structure of the anthology. This chapter is more personal and reflective than most of the other essays, and while it does not directly advance the author's primary arguments, it is an example of both the variety and personality within this collection.

Another strength is how Eisenberg relates theory with practical examples of strategic ambiguity in organizational communication. Some essays link theory to topics like training, organizational change, and identity. For example, Chapter 11, "Transforming Organizations Through Communication," examines how theories of organizational communication relate to theories of planned organizational change. Eisenberg's analysis on the search for a university provost in Part 2 (Chapter 10) stands out for both its analysis of narrative interpretations of a single decision-making process, and for the narrative flow of the essay itself. In this chapter, Eisenberg again addresses assumptions about what constitutes effective organizational communication. He addresses paradigms like communication as a construct of the reality of the organization, and that meaning is constructed in a local, social, and historical context (pp. 154-155). These concepts are then applied to his experience in the hiring process of a university provost by analyzing different narratives from those involved in the decision-making process. Eisenberg argues that different views coexist in a "plural present," and that these views add depth and "richness" to the process (p. 180). A push for clarity or for consensus in terms of a single interpretation of events would not only limit the decision-making process, but it would also be logically improbable.

The tone of this collection of essays is reflexive and somewhat defensive. Eisenberg introduces each essay with a few paragraphs about why it was written and how it was received by its intended audience. For example, Eisenberg notes that his 1984 article (Chapter 1) was problematic in its relational definition of strategic ambiguity, yet influential in encouraging further scholarship on ambiguity. Chapter 8, "A Communication Perspective on Interorganizational Cooperation and Inner-City Education," begins with Eisenberg's description of his frustration about the lack of response to his research on the value of strategic ambiguity (p. 129). These introductions for each chapter connote defensiveness about the theory of strategic ambiguity as contrary to mainstream theories, and about Eisenberg's attempts to question and challenge conventional ideas. However, this underlying tone serves a purpose by linking disparate essays together with a narrative thread about Eisenberg's motivation. Additionally, knowing some background about the essays helps the reader to better understand how each essay fits into not only Eisenberg's body of work, but also into larger fields of study.

For future research, Eisenberg could further address the role of ethics in the use of strategic ambiguity. In the introduction to Chapter 1, Eisenberg provides the example of how Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North used "plausible denial," a form of strategic ambiguity, when he testified to the U.S. Congress in the 1980s (p. 3). In concluding this collection of essays, Eisenberg points out how a drive toward certainty can be negative or even destructive, particularly in political situations, such as McCarthyism, the backlash against moral relativism in the 1970s, and Ronald Reagan's statement that "the era of self-doubt is over" (p. 296). Eisenberg uses these examples to argue against closed-minded certainty, and for broader themes of accepting multiple meanings, cosmopolitanism, and open-mindedness. Eisenberg points out that he has been criticized for not examining power and domination in relation to strategic

ambiguity (p. 241), and that Weick himself has also been criticized for not pursuing political power issues (p. 270). Further analysis of strategic ambiguity and ethical considerations could be explored in relation to political communication, as well as within organizational communication.

In the endeavor to address universal themes like identity or a person's place in the world, Eisenberg's rhetoric stretches a bit farther than his theoretical foundation of strategic ambiguity. This book attempts to not just reflect the evolution of the authors' work on strategic ambiguity, but also to analyze the subjects of attachment and the broader existential role of the individual in terms of identity construction and meaning-making. Eisenberg links strategic ambiguity to an idealistic push for a more cosmopolitan, open-minded world view. Eisenberg tries to go beyond the critique of theory to set out a vision for organizational communication, and to address broader themes of respect for other viewpoints and non-attachment. Thus, though many of Eisenberg's essays take a critical approach, his introduction, conclusion, and the underlying tone of the book are overreaching and defensive, yet also passionate and sincere in associating strategic ambiguity and related theories with universal themes.

References

Giddens, A. (1979). *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weick, K.E. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.