Self-Reflections in Organizations: An Outsider Remarks on Looking at Culture and Lore from the Inside

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As apparent from the title of my remarks, I am an outsider to this organization. I teach folklore courses at UCLA, which is one of five institutions in North America offering both the M.A. and the Ph.D. degrees in the study of folklore. I have been asked to speak in this session, in part because I give courses on folk art and aesthetics, fieldwork, and organizational culture and symbolism. As an outsider, as a researcher of organizational culture, and as the final speaker in this session, it seems to be my role to suggest a larger framework of study to which this mini-convention relates. That framework is the rapidly growing field that examines symbolic behavior and culture in organizations.

Professional Associations as Culture-Bearing Milieux

Like other human communities, organizations have their rites, rituals, and ceremonies. Even as we speak, a field of study is rapidly developing to research these traditions. Some of the books are Deal and Kennedy’s Corporate Culture: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life; Organizational Symbolism, edited by Pondy et al.; Schein’s Organizational Culture and Leadership: A Dynamic View; Gaining Control of the Corporate Culture, edited by Kilmann and Associates; Organizational Culture, edited by Frost et al.; and Sathe’s Culture and Related Corporate Realities.

For the most part, investigations of organizational culture or symbolism focus on business enterprises rather than not-for-profit service organizations. In the U.S. there are thousands of associations like the NAEA, however, with millions of members. These trade and professional associations represent a mind-boggling array of occupations, hobbies, and special interest groups (Samuelson, 1989).

For example, although I am not a member of the National Art Education Association, I am, I’ve recently come to realize, a member of nearly two dozen other organizations similar to NAEA. They range from the American Folklore Society to the Popular Culture Association. I am also a member of various regional and local scholarly organizations.

Like the NAEA, the majority of these associations have annual meetings. Many are in the spring — historically a time for rites of renewal. This
month, for example, I am participating in three conventions and one conference. Of these four events, three are occurring right now, a week after Easter (April 1988).

Structurally, the annual meetings of associations exhibit features in common. Most have speakers, break out sessions, committee meetings, a business meeting, luncheons, public receptions, private parties, awards ceremonies, a trade show, tours, social events, and an annual banquet. But conventions also differ from one organization to another and through time. One of the differences at the NAEA convention this year is that there is a mini-conference within the larger conference that examines NAEA conferences past and present.

The mini-conference is unusual in that it grows out of self-reflection—not research by an outsider but documentation and analysis from the insider by some of the members of the organization who are reflecting on their own experiences and inferences. Typically, however, the literature contends that organizational culture consists of underlying assumptions and values which members are unaware of or take for granted and therefore cannot articulate. Perhaps it is better to consider culture as sort of an automatic pilot, providing direction and focus for activities and decisions in a way that doesn’t require one’s full or even conscious attention.

Research on Organizational Culture, Folklore, and Symbolism

The concept “organizational character” appeared in the early 1970’s. By the end of the decade, terms such as organizational “stories,” “myths,” and “ceremonials” were beginning to be explored in the administrative literature. But neither “culture” nor “symbolism” was in the lexicon of management until very recent years.

In October of 1980 Business Week carried an article titled “Corporate Culture: Those Hard-to-Define Values That Spell Success or Failure.” The focus was on businesses that had tried to implement various strategies of expansion—mergers, acquisitions, new product lines—but that had failed because of beliefs and ways of doing things in the companies which resisted these new strategies but whose existence was unknown at the time. When the history of organizational culture studies is written, a particularly important work to be cited appeared in 1980, this time in a scholarly journal published in the Academy of Management Review, and authored jointly by Dandridge, Mitroff, and Joyce. It was called “Organizational Symbolism: A Topic to Expand Organizational Analysis.”

“The term ‘organizational symbolism,’” write the authors, “refers to those aspects of an organization that its members use to reveal or make comprehensible the unconscious feelings, images, and values that are inherent in that organization” (p. 77). Organizational symbolism includes what the authors call verbal symbols, such as myth, legend, story, slogans, jokes, and rituals; and material symbols, such as logos, awards, badges, pins, and so forth (p. 80). Most of these forms of symbolic behavior are evident in a convention.

According to Dandridge, Mitroff, and Joyce, “Symbolism expresses the underlying character, ideology, or value system of an organization. In making this character comprehensible,” they write, “symbols can reinforce it or can expose it to criticism and modification” (p. 77). As other presenters in this session have indicated, the stories that people tell, the customs they engage in, even the ways they organize and decorate their spaces for meetings, meditation, and marketing communicate much about attitudes, beliefs, or concerns.

Granted, organizations are culture-bearing milieux. And symbolism pervades them. The Question arises, so what? Why study symbolic behavior and culture in organizations?

Why are Culture and Symbolic Behavior Important?

Interest in organizational culture developed at a time of severe economic recession in the U.S. In search of causes and cures, researchers closely examined America’s highly successful foreign competitors. They discovered a different “style,” “system,” or “culture” of management. In its emphasis on cooperation, participative decision-making, and care and concern about employees and customers, this system differed from what tended to be taught in American graduate schools of business, and practiced in many factories or offices.

Awareness of the existence and importance of symbolic behavior in organizations occurred at the same time. For decades, the dominant model in conceptualizing organization was that of the machine. In terms of scientific management, the ideal in organization design was to create a system that would run with machine-like efficiency. It rarely happened, however. Despite so-called rational, scientific approaches to the engineering of organizations and jobs, there was still the human dimension to organizations.

The concept of organizational culture and symbolism attracts a following because it offers “a way to address the interactive, ongoing, repetitive aspects of organization...” (Jelinek et al., 1983, p. 331). No longer are organizations viewed as simply technological systems. Nor does the mechanical model seem appropriate. Instead, organizations are being conceived of as “social realities,” human creations (Jelinek et al., 1983), and symbolic and aesthetic phenomena (Jones, 1988).

Imagine going to work in an organization devoid of symbols. Only tangible, explicit, instrumental objects would exist,” writes Richard L. Daft (1984, p. 199). “This organization would have no retirement dinners, no stories or anecdotes, no myths about the company’s past,” no metaphors and sayings, and so on. There would be little communication and virtually no interaction, because these are largely symbolic activities. Reduced to a mechanical system, the organization would yield goods and services in a robot-like fashion (if at all).

“An organization designer’s dream? More like a nightmare,” writes Daft, for “an organization without symbols would be unworkable for human beings... Employees receive a wide range of cues from symbolic elements of organization. Symbols help employees interpret and under-
stand the organization and their role in it by providing information about status, power, commitment, motivation, control, values and norms." In other words, the culture which in turn affects climate and behavior.

Although the field of organizational ethnography is in its infancy, mounting evidence suggests the central importance of culture and symbolic behavior in understanding and changing organizational climate, improving leadership, and enhancing communication and cooperation. Indeed, culture and the symbolic have been implicated as major determinants of organization effectiveness and individual satisfaction (Schein, 1985; Sathe, 1985; Jones et al., 1988).

This mini-conference on the conference as ritual contributes to the growing body of literature exploring the impact of culture and symbolic behavior on the character and functioning of organizations. Indeed, the mini-conference addresses topics that have seldom if ever been examined. One is the meanings, values, and assumptions that lie behind and are expressed through the conceptualization and decoration of space. Surprisingly, there is little research on any aspect of organizational material culture, despite the fact that, for example, organizations physically occupy space, that organizations institutionalize design and allocate that space, and that their members personalize the space that is assigned to them.

Another matter brought up at this conference but rarely discussed in the literature on organizations is the concept "ambience." Instead, the meteorological term "climate" continues to be relied upon although there is no consensus as to its meaning or how to measure it (Naylor, 1980). Perhaps worse is the connotation of the word: people might complain about the climate but there is little they can do to change it. While this might still be true of natural phenomena like the weather, we are coming to realize that organizations are human creations. As the presentations by Taylor and Pearse demonstrate, the character and quality of an organizational milieu are very much an outcome of interpersonal relations and the symbolic expression. Therefore, the appropriate concept seems to be not climate so much as ambience. And the word "ambience" is fundamentally an aesthetic concept. Herein lies an important fact.

Organizations have been studied largely by people trained in quantitative methods, not qualitative research. It is in the nature of questionnaires, poles and so on that they distance the researchers from the people whose beliefs and behavior are studied. This research is almost mechanistic, like the model and paradigm on the basis of which organizations have been studied, designed and managed for decades. In contrast, qualitative methods require the perspective of the insider, and focus on individuals' motives as well as the community of shared symbols, sentiments, and meanings. Uniquely, the participants in this mini-conference on the conference as ritual are examining the organization from the inside, as members who are using largely qualitative methods. Perhaps most significant, the organization in question is one composed of art educators. Since their focus is on artistic phenomena, they are more likely than most researchers to examine the aesthetic qualities of organizations.

Conclusions

Two major reasons for researching most anything about the human condition are to understand the phenomenon in question and then, armed with this understanding, to act - hopefully in such a way as to perpetuate that which functions for the common weal and to improve that which works against human welfare.

At this NAEA convention (8-12, April 1988, Los Angeles), nearly a dozen presentations in two half-day sessions have explored how organizational identity, group awareness, and expressive behavior are displayed, acknowledged, reinforced, challenged, and sometimes manipulated during the annual convention. Much has been learned about human behavior, about organizations, and about behavior of people within a particular organization. In these discoveries are ramifications and implications.

Amy Brook Snider and her colleagues have raised some of the most important questions one can pose about an organization. What is its system of values, its cherished beliefs, and the symbols that express these? How do people affect, and in turn how are they affected by, the organization? How can communication be improved, leadership enhanced, and the organization's goals strengthened?

In addressing these questions, this mini-convention reinforces some aspects of the character and value system of the organization while simultaneously exposing other aspects to critical scrutiny and change. This is what much of symbolic behavior in an organization does: either reinforcing the culture or challenging it. The end result is often the same, that of improving the organization and helping it to function rather than against, people. This mini-conference may be a model for how members themselves can reflect on the culture and lore of their organization, gaining greater understanding and also taking action.

Definitions of Terms and Concepts

Organizational climate

"There are few constructs in organizational psychology as confusing and as universally misunderstood as the construct of organizational climate," writes Naylor (1980, p. 251). "The major source of this confusion centers around the extreme difficulty that has been experienced in attempting to define climate." Although there is controversy about its meaning and how to measure it, organizational climate generally is taken to be how members perceive an organization's practices, the effects of this on ways of thinking about the organization, and the impact of both on members' behavior (Tosi, 1985, p. 129; Naylor, 1980).

In this conceptualization, "climate" as a metaphor is true to its meteorological origins. That is, climate as a geographical phenomenon refers to the atmospheric conditions or weather conditions in relation to temperature, degree of dryness or humidity, wind, clearness of the sky and so on as these affect life in a particular region. Climate is given; organisms can react or respond to it but not alter it. (This is in keeping with the mechanistic
paradigm that has dominated organizational theory for decades, and fits the mechanical model of organization; but with the shift to a more organic paradigm and the use of culture as root metaphor, the construct “climate” seems to be a “survival” or example of “culture lag.”

Ambience, on the other hand, arises out of a combination of actors, relationships, and settings over which human beings certainly do have control. Most dictionaries define the term as the mood, character, quality, tone, atmosphere of an environment or milieu. Ambience is, thus, an aesthetic phenomenon in its fundament, that is, a product of human creation that both affects and is affected by people’s identities, attitudes, and interactions. As such, it seems a more appropriate construct in the study of organizations, which also are human artifacts.

Symbolic and Culture

Nearly everyone agrees on what symbolic means. The word “symbol” refers to a visible sign of something invisible, such as an idea or a quality. Problems arise in application. Virtually anything and everything may be assigned meaning by anyone at anytime. Some symbols are individual; others are social. Meanings change. This is probably why some researchers of organization behavior (e.g., Schein, 1985) eschew the documenting of stories and other symbolic forms as sources of information about assumptions and values. However, most of our communication and interaction takes the form of narrating, the use of metaphorical speech, ritualizing, and so forth - which folklorists have long recognized as traditions or folklore, that is, symbolic forms and processes of communication, which are manifest in people’s interaction and exhibit continuities or consistencies over time or space, respectively.

No one agrees on the meaning or components of culture. To some, culture is simply “how things are done around here” (Deal and Kennedy, 1982) while others consider it shared values (Peters and Waterman, 1982). Yet others conceive of culture as both customs and traditions on the one hand, and values on the other (Louis, 1980). Or it is basic assumptions that determine espoused values which then are expressed in visible artifacts (Schein, 1985).

I use the word “culture” to refer to pervasive or dominant assumptions and values as well as the customs, traditions, and other symbolic forms and processes that communicate them but also are affected by them. For example, a ritual (a symbolic form) or the act of narrating (a symbolic process) may express organizational values which are informed by basic assumptions about nature and human activities; but people’s assumptions as a social and values may be influenced by the ritual or the act of narrating as an event and communicative process. You cannot say that “the culture is expressed symbolically”; rather, symbolic behavior (especially folklore) as expressed symbolically. Rather, symbolic behavior (especially folklore) as expressed symbolically;

For some, “symbolic” connotes superficially as opposed to substance. Many managers and organization theorists, therefore, differentiate between the “instrumental” and the “symbolic” (e.g., Pfeffer, 1981). Computers, funds to maintain operating expenses, and so on are practical matters. However, their presence in one unit and absence in another, or the ease or difficulty of obtaining them from higher up, may be interpreted as indicative of beliefs, attitudes, and values in the organization; hence, these things and the behaviors that surround making them available may be seen as symbolic. In addition, if it generates cohesiveness or enhances performance, then expressive behavior (e.g., rituals, language, or stories) has immediate, practical consequences and therefore, although “symbolic,” is also highly instrumental.

To many, a “leader” is a charismatic figure, inspiring others and causing them to behave in ways they probably would not have without his or her influence (Hunt, 1985; Lantos, 1987). A leader manages. But a manager also leads, setting the tone of an organization. Because they are expected to provide guidance and resources as well as feedback, recognition, and rewards, managers become symbols: what they say or do is meaningful, and is assigned meanings. It is essential, therefore, that managers be aware of what they are communicating through the things they do (or don’t do) and how they do them.

Many standard survey instruments and assessment tools are interpreting something so elusive, ephemeral, and often ambiguous as symbolic communication and interaction, or that which is so taken for granted as assumptions and values. Qualitative methods are essential. But field-based studies of organizational culture rarely if ever reveal the specific procedures employed in inquiry. Even contributors to Kilmann et al. (1985) do not provide detailed discussions of how to gain control of the corporate culture in research or management. Guides to cultural research (Schein, 1985; Sathe, 1985) offer only generalized procedures. What is required at this stage is to turn to an extensive body of ethnographic literature, much of which seems to have been overlooked in organization studies, and to render the most promising techniques serviceable to research on specific organizational issues.

One way to obtain information about climate or ambience, for example, is to observe people’s demeanor and countenance, dress and appearance, personalization of work space, and social routines including ritualistic interaction. Telling in this respect are the presence or absence of joking, foodsharing, festive events, and so forth. Listening to the stories they tell and analyzing the expressions they use are likewise helpful. Specific questions might include “What is it like to work here?” Why is it this way? What gets done, or does not get done because of this?” Ask for examples. Elicit stories and metaphors.

To uncover organizational assumptions and values, one must observe and inquire about such matters as those indicated above as well as communication, recognition, rewards, decision-making, and so forth. One can request descriptions of “critical incidents” or “organizational dramas,” noting recurrent themes indicating whether changes were by constraint or choice (the difference is wording between “forced,” “caused,” “we had to” versus “decide,” “intention,” “our desire was”); isolating claims of unique-
ness (and analyzing their nature); and identifying goals, objectives, and philosophy. To discover notions about the nature of human and the nature, one could ask for examples of (and elicit stories about) successful as well as unsuccessful individuals in the company, whom one sees as a leader (and why), and the kind, amount, and usefulness of training. Yet other queries can solicit ideas about the nature of human relations and activities, time, and the basis of decisions in the organization.

The inquiry also needs to differentiate espoused from latent values, the ideal from actuality, and the degree of consistency between what is professed and what is practiced. In doing so, the researcher must pay particular attention to behavior that is symbolic, i.e., assigned meanings and believed to be meaningful. Most of the symbolic behavior in organizations is one or another form of folklore.

Organizational folklore

By "organizational folklore" I mean the subject matter for study, which may consist of, variously, folklore in organizational settings, folklore about organizations, or examples of folklore as instances of organizing. For example, in the Academic Resources Center Math-Science Tutorials - one of many units being studied at UCLA in a pilot project on management - all three kinds of "organizational folklore" are evident (Jones, 1987). A softball team and its games, annual Halloween parties and other impromptu, spontaneous, and ad hoc traditions exemplify folklore as instances of informal organizing. Stories about members or former members of the unit, and stories told by others about the unit and its members, are examples of folklore concerning organizations. A whole host of traditions generated in tutorial sessions, among networks of tutors, and among the various levels of organizational settings. In other words, the referent is not just occupation; it is organization. Hence, the subject matter is not simply or exclusively "occupational" lore. In addition, there are implications and ramifications for understanding the concept organization and improving existing organizations.

By "organizational folklore studies" I mean that inquiry into expressive forms and processes manifested in people's interactions in which the concepts of organization and organizing are primary. An analysis of how traditions are spontaneously generated and informally organized, a study of informal organization within a formal and enduring institution, and research on the impact of formal organization on folklore (and vice versa) - all are examples of organizational folklore studies. So, too, is considering the implications of folklore research. "Organizational folklore studies" extend "occupational folklore research" when it recognizes that some of the traditions are generated within, about, or because of organizations. Organizational folklore studies also develop and extend occupational folklore research by consciously exploring the concepts "organization" and "organizing" and/or by considering the relationship between traditions and the character of the organization in which they are manifested. For more discussion and exemplification of organizational folklore and organizational folklore studies, see Michael Owen Jones, 1987.

References


An Outsider Remarks 125
Discussion

An open letter to members of the Caucus on Social Theory & Art Education: A remark on Re(mark)!

In the last Caucus Newsletter, we announced the results of the poll about the name of the Bulletin of the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education. Of thirteen responses received, ten supported the change from Bulletin to Journal. There were six votes against the introduction of an additional word and flavor into the title: two because they did not like the esoteric nature of the suggested word(s); two because they did not want a greater length to the title. One suggested reducing the name to the Bulletin: Journal on Social Theory and Art Education.

Of the seven who voted favorably, preferences distributed themselves: Re(Marks) = 2; Re(Mark) = 3; Re(Mark)! = 1; Re(mark) = 1.

Readers with a particular passion were invited to write up their arguments for the Newsletter and so win converts to their persuasion. The following are the results of that invitation: -Eleda Katan

Dear friends,

As you know, due to the hard work and continual vigilance and perseverance of such members as Eleda Katan, and Arthur Guagliumi, a tally of the votes for the possibility of the journal's new name Re(mark)! Journal of the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education was defeated —by a narrow margin I should add. None of us (I hope I do not misrepresent the membership) felt that the word “bulletin” should be retained because