"Myths and Symbols: Organizational"
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Abstract

In what follows, described first are the essential features of 'organizational symbolism,' since this has been the intellectual context within which the constructs analyzed have largely been developed. As this distinctive stream of inquiry, within the field of organization studies, focuses on the expressive—as opposed to the instrumental, pragmatic—dimension of organizational life,

the nature of (and the tensions implied by) the inter-relations between productive and symbolic practices are analyzed. Recent developments and methodological innovations in the field are also discussed. The main traits and functions of different organizational symbols—language and linguistic constructs (myths), (ritual) behaviors, and objects/artifacts—are then described.

Discussed in particular is the role of the saga—defined as a collection of myths—in the process of institutionalization and in shaping organizational identity. Finally, the origin and function of mediatory myths in managing the dialectic relation between organizational ideology and operational needs are highlighted.

1 Organizational Symbolism

The constructs 'organizational myth' and 'organizational symbol' first made their appearance in organizational and managerial studies in the second half of the 1970s, at a time of renewed and rapidly spreading interest in the cultural study of organizations. This interest was manifest in two main currents of study: the inter-organizational perspective of 'new institutionalism' (Meyer and Rowan 1977, Powell and DiMaggio 1991), which explored the ways in which cultural values shape organizational forms—and induce the organizations that populate a particular 'field' (a territory, an industrial sector, or a distinct sphere of institutional life) to grow similar rather than dissimilar—and the micro-perspective of 'organizational symbolism' (Dandridge et al. 1980, Pondy et al. 1983, Turner 1990), which viewed individual organizations as 'cultures' characterized by distinct paradigms, to be then analyzed not only in their instrumental and economic aspects but also in their ideational and symbolic ones, using holistic and interpretative research models (see *Organizational Culture*).

Born at the end of the 1970s as a marginal and nonconformist phenomenon, organizational symbolism rapidly grew into one of the main currents of thought in organizational studies. It produced an extraordinary flourishing of studies and research, gaining unusual popularity even outside the academic sphere. Most notable among the numerous surveys of this body of literature are the following: Alvesson and Berg (1992), a particularly thorough treatment which reviews the various theoretical perspectives that have developed internally to the movement, and discusses the relevance of symbolism to managerial practice; Trice and Beyer (1993), which provides a detailed picture of the material set out in numerous empirical research studies; and

Jones (1996), which gives an overview of the main methodological issues connected with the study of organizational symbolism.

Although the approach employed by the movement's exponents was often presented as radically innovative, it was in fact deeply rooted in the social sciences. Despite their frequent use of anthropological terms and concepts, scholars of organizational cultures more frequently acknowledge their intellectual indebtedness to certain currents of sociological thought—in particular to phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, and above all to the great ethnographic tradition of urban and occupational sociology (e.g., Whyte 1955, Becker 1951, Roy 1961). However, although an approach inspired by the same theoretical ideas had already been used in the study of formal organizations (see, in particular, Selznick 1949, Gouldner 1954, Blau 1955, Dalton 1959; Crozier 1963), until the early 1970s organizational and managerial studies were indubitably dominated by a rationalist and positivist paradigm which viewed the analysis of relations among objective and measurable variables as the central concern of research, and substantially neglected the notion of culture. Ironically, many of these analyses were conducted in the name of Max Weber (Ouchi and Wilkins 1985), regarded as the founding father of organizational theory, but they ignored Weber's invitation to see organizations as the expression of cultural values, interpreting his bureaucratic model instead as the organizational model *par excellence* and with no alternatives (Clegg 1995). In one of the first essays devoted expressly to organizational symbolism, Dandridge et al. (1980) wrote that:

'…a survey of major texts within the field of organizational behavior establishes clearly that there are virtually *no* references to the phenomenon that is the subject of this paper…For all

practical purposes…it is as if the phenomenon did not exist or was not important.' In effect, in those years the statement that organizations have their own myths and symbols would have seemed at most a paradox, almost an oxymoron, to the extent that formal organizations— especially economic ones—were regarded as utilitarian forms of social aggregation in which individual and collective behaviors were governed mainly by norms of instrumental rationality (see *Organization: Overview*). If modern organizations are, by definition, the domain of a legal-rational ethos, and characterized by pragmatic behaviors shaped by the practical goals to which they are directed, how can these organizations possibly harbor expressive and disinterested behaviors shaped by impulses and emotions? And if these forms of behavior do exist, how can they be anything but secondary, irrelevant, or at any rate dysfunctional and therefore to be eliminated? Organizational symbolism challenges these prevalent opinions and invites us to read organizations in a completely different light. As Turner (1990) observes, '…the current growth of interest in organizational symbolism and corporate culture points to the end of an era. Looking anew at the organizational world we can see that it is a sensual and emotional realm, replete with its own ceremonies, rites and dramas.'

The cultural approach asserts that every productive practice is determined equally by the practical requirements from which it springs and by particular visions of the world. No productive practice is only and exclusively such, for it is simultaneously a symbolic practice, a way to appropriate reality by imposing one's own specific view of what reality is. Accordingly, scholars of organizational cultures have explored the interweaving of technical requirements and

expressive needs, the ritualistic significance of apparently rigorously pragmatic behaviors and processes, the overlapping of ideological prejudice and mythic knowledge with scientific expertise. In other words, they have shown that culture and utility are woven together in even the most strictly utilitarian forms of social aggregation. From this perspective, therefore, organizations—and their environments—are conceived as 'symbolic fields': that is, as inter-subjectively negotiated systems of meaning recognizable in a coherent set of symbols or conventional representations of important and complex aspects of organizational and social reality. Decoding an organization's symbolic field involves analysis of its answers to such fundamental questions as, for example, the reliability or unreliability of human beings, the symmetry or asymmetry of social relations, the type of relationship—dominance, harmony, or subordination—with the external environment, the nature of reality and of truth, and so on.

In the early 2000s the study of organizational symbolism and corporate cultures gradually lost the popularity and central role it had built up in the previous twenty years. At first glance that intellectual movement seems to have become marginal to organizational studies and to have run out of innovative steam. Yet, on closer examination, it has not disappeared but has gradually been replaced by: a) currents of parallel studies that came into being and thrived in a general climate of epistemological renewal encouraged by the symbolist movement; and b) thematic studies that grew as offshoots from the mature branch of studies focused on organizations as cultures.

Among the parallel movements that organizational symbolism contributed to legitimize it is worth mentioning the narrative approach (Czarniawska 1997, Czarniawska and Gagliardi 2003), which emphasized the importance of the stories and myths produced in organizations and explored the analogy – proposed by Ricoeur (1981) – between text (narrating) and action. (organizing): "The raw material of everyday organizational life consists of disconnected fragments, physical and verbal actions that do not make sense when reported with simple chronology. Narrating is organizing this raw and fragmented material with the help of such devices as plot and characters. Simultaneously, organizing makes narration possible, because it orders people, things and events in time and place." (Czarniawska and Gagliardi 2003, p. VII).

The most striking of the thematic studies that developed within the symbolist movement is so-called 'organizational aesthetics.' This approach sets out to study the role of sensory experience in the daily life of organizations, i.e.: a) (tacit) aesthetic knowledge as opposed to intellectual knowledge; b) disinterested, 'expressive' action shaped by the emotions, as opposed to 'impressive' action that can be recognized in terms of the practical aims that it focuses on; and, lastly, c) aesthetic communication, seen as the set of modes whereby sensory experience – by nature ineffable – is conveyed and shared. The development of this current of thought has been enhanced by the study of artifacts, one of the three fundamental symbolic systems that can be used – as we see in the next section – to express the beliefs and values of a culture. Although some remarks on the importance of the aesthetic dimension of organizations were conducted slightly earlier (Jones et al. 1988, Strati 1990, Ramirez 1991), there has been a growing production of literature on the subject since the late 2000s (Linstead & Hopfl 2000, Strati 1999, Guillet de Monthoux 2004, Gagliardi 2006). Its aim is to explore the methodological

implications of a specifically 'aesthetic' approach to the study of organizations, as a distinct research field. Organizational aesthetics is in fact solidly rooted in the cultural-symbolist movement without, however, sharing its predominant cognitivist stance (Gagliardi 2006).

2 Organizational Symbols: Types and Functions

The definition of 'symbol' most widely used by scholars of organizational cultures is the one provided by Cohen (1976): 'Symbols are objects, acts, relationships or linguistic formations that stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions, and impel men to action.' Organizational symbols normally are grouped into three categories corresponding to the three main systems for expressing beliefs and cultural values within an organization: verbal language, behavioral language, and the language of objects.

2.1 Verbal Symbols

Principal among verbal symbols is language itself, with its ability to categorize and articulate experience using specific 'jargons,' which may differ even among organizations operating in the same context and speaking the same language. The category of verbal symbols also comprises linguistic artifacts like legends, stories, slogans, the names given to places, persons, events, and myths. The latter can be defined as dramatized accounts of events whose veracity is asserted as

dogma, or is taken for granted, and which have the effect of legitimating and making desirable the behavior enacted in the events narrated and the ideas from which such behavior springs. To the extent that the cadence of organizational life is set by the alternation of crucial experiences—which jeopardize its identity and sometimes its very survival—with periods of relative stability, myths are often the idealization of the specific ways in which those difficulties have been overcome, and they shape the routines that orient behavior during periods of stability. Consequently, the myths most frequently encountered in organizations relate to their birth (myth of the origin) and to the transformations induced by traumatic events (the death of the founder, for example, or a slump in the market). In all organizations, the beliefs and values that myths embody exert a pervasive influence on decisions (see *Organizational Decision Making*), and it is difficult not to discern an element of 'mythic knowledge' even in decisions apparently taken solely on technical-scientific grounds. However, it has been pointed out that the more decisions are operational, and the effects of actions measurable, the more decisions are taken following principles of instrumental rationality, and the broader the range of options and viable choices available. By contrast, the more choices are general and tied to the base values on which the organization grounds its identity, the more restricted the range of options, and the more mythical, prescientific and unamenable to the scrutiny of reason and experience becomes the knowledge utilized (Gagliardi 1986).

2.2 Symbolic Actions

Of particular importance among the symbolic manifestations represented by acts and styles of behavior are rites and ceremonials as emotionally charged collective actions—usually performed in a rigorously prescribed sequence—by means of which an organizational community celebrates its successes, heroes, and organizational ideals. Various classifications of organizational rites—which assume a wide variety of connotations—have been proposed, as well as analysis of their manifest and covert cultural consequences (Trice and Beyer 1984). Among the most frequently observable rites are:

> (a) rites of passage (e.g., training seminars as a prelude to a promotion), which ease the transition of individuals to new roles and status;

> (b) rites of enhancement (like the awarding of bonuses for outstanding performance), which consolidate the social identities of the rewarded and induce others to emulate them;

> (c) rites of degradation (like the replacement of senior managers for some reason deemed unworthy), which solemnly and publicly reaffirm the importance of the social roles compromised by the behavior of the persons degraded;

> (d) rites of integration (like the celebrations organized by businesses on special occasions like Christmas or the anniversary of the company's foundation), which

encourage shared feelings of equality and participation in a common enterprise, temporarily suspending the norms which sanction differences in power and status, but implicitly reaffirm the adequacy of those rules in day-to-day life;

(e) rites of renewal (like the periodic drawing up of strategic plans), which reassure the organization's members that it is keeping up with the times and that present problems will be overcome, but at the same time bolster the legitimacy of existing systems of power and authority.

2.3 Artifacts and Aesthetic Knowledge

A third system of symbols is constituted by material artifacts, or the intentional products of human action which exist in the organization independently of their creator and which can be perceived by the senses: products, images, buildings, furnishings, arrangements of physical space. Given the durability of physical matter, artifacts are able tenaciously and incessantly to transmit particular messages and cultural stimuli, thereby encouraging the diffusion and sharing of special 'modes of feeling' in ways that are all the more efficient because they evade intellectual control (Gagliardi 1990).

The advent of organizational aesthetics has given/received a great boost to/from the study of corporate artifacts as vehicles of sensory knowledge and what is defined as 'corporate pathos,' i.e. the specific 'way of feeling', cultivated and transmitted in the culture of each organization. Artifacts include a category that has recently been the focus of considerable attention: images. This highlights the increasingly important role of visual methods in organizational research (Warren 2009), a trend in line with the development of "a mass-mediated, image-saturated

society where aesthetic appeal is an increasingly important arbiter of economic value" (Warren 2009, p. 566). Images are above all visual but we can also speak of auditory, tactile and olfactory images in order to refer to distinctive combinations of sensible experiences recognizable through senses other than sight. The heuristic potential of images – in this wider definition – derives from their capacity to elude the restraints of descriptive language (which only allows us to say one thing at a time) and enables the use of a 'presentational' language (which allows us to say several, even contradictory things simultaneously, thus conveying knowledge by acquaintance, which eliminates the filter of abstraction) (Langer 1967, 1969; Bruner 1962). Images can be used as research data in two ways: a) as already existing artifacts produced in the daily life of organizations or b) as data produced on the spot at the request of the ethnographer (Meyer 1991).

The growing importance attached to the study of artifacts, to the structuring of space and the sensory experiences that they encourage or hinder – has led to deep innovations in ethnographic practice. It has also meant breaking the monopoly of traditional fieldwork techniques and has highlighted the indispensable role of the researcher's 'sensuality' as an epistemological disposition and vital tool in understanding reality (Fine, 1996, Stoller 1997).

3 The Role of the Saga in the Process of Institutionalization

The organizational myths of origin and transformation are often blended together in a 'saga' or an account of an 'extraordinary' series of events which traverses and unifies the various phases

of the organization's evolution. In a saga, historical facts are embellished by subsequent re-elaborations, inconsistencies are eliminated or justified, and the rational explanation of how certain means lead to certain ends acquires an affective connotation which transforms the workplace into a loveable and loved institution. The saga therefore performs an essential role in the process of institutionalization: that is, in the process by which the organization, from a sterile mechanical apparatus for the efficient distribution and coordination of tasks, becomes imbued with values and acquires a distinctive 'character.' This character on the one hand underpins the collective identity and sentiment of belonging of the organization's members, while on the other it legitimates the organization in the social environment (Selznick 1957). 'Whether developed primarily by management or by employees, the story helps rationalize for the individual his commitment of time and energy for years, perhaps for a life-time, to a particular enterprise. Even when weak, the belief can compensate in part for the loss of meaning in much modern work, giving some drama and some cultural identity to one's otherwise entirely instrumental efforts. At the other end of the continuum, a saga engages one so intensely as to make his immediate place overwhelmingly valuable. It can even produce a distortion, with the organization becoming the only reality, the outside world becoming illusion, (Clark 1972).

To the extent that the saga generates a shared conviction that the organization is unique because it has been the protagonist of an unusual enterprise crowned by extraordinary success—a conviction which induces individuals to remain within the system, endeavoring to improve it rather than pursuing their interests elsewhere—the saga may constitute a precious organizational resource. Indeed, ensuring the stable participation and constant commitment of its members is

one of the crucial problems faced by any co-operative system constructed to pursue specific ends.

4 Mediatory Myths

In that, as mentioned in Sect. 1, the dialectical relation between expressive needs and pragmatic exigencies unavoidably conditions the lives of organizations, a further crucial organizational problem is the management of the contradictions, tensions and psychological costs that derive from that relation: mediatory myths are discursive formulations which make contradictions acceptable.

Unlike the myths of origin and transformation, which mainly orient actions to be undertaken, mediatory myths provide retrospective justification for previous actions and states of affairs. The need to justify concrete action arises, first, from the fact that different values may conflict in specific situations—and it is difficult to comply with one principle without being in breach of another—and second from the fact that actions always tend, actually or apparently, to fall short of the ideals that have inspired them, so that there is invariably a gap between 'what we should do' and 'what we are able to do,' between the purity of the ideal and the impurity of the concrete organizational practice. Mediatory myths harmonize conflicting principles, not by means of logical arguments but by means of assertions of fact, and they resolve or reconcile contradictions by simply denying and inverting them, or by holding irreconcilable alternatives in suspension.

Abravanel (1983) reports an interesting example of a mediatory myth: that of the 'wild ducks' institutionalized at IBM when T. J. Watson Jr. was chief executive officer. The contradiction between the ideology encouraged by Watson, namely that the company's employees were free to express their individuality, and a corporate reality characterized by rigid training and socialization practices was resolved by institutionalizing the myth that the employees were like wild ducks: they could not be tamed but nevertheless flew in formation and did not choose their migratory route.

See also:

Competitive Strategies: Organizational; Corporate Culture; Information and Knowledge: Organizational; Innovation: Organizational; Intelligence: Organizational; Intelligence, Prior Knowledge, and Learning; Leadership in Organizations, Sociology of; Learning: Organizational; Organizational Behavior, Psychology of; Organizational Decision Making; Organizations, Metaphors and Paradigms in; Organizations, Sociology of; Rational Choice and Organization Theory; Strategy: Organizational; Symbolism (Religious) and Icon

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