Organizational Symbolism

The expression *organizational symbolism* denotes an analytical approach that views organizations as systems of beliefs, feelings, and values underlying the productive practices, pragmatic behaviors, and every other overt and immediately observable feature of organizational life. These systems are manifest in linguistic formations, acts, and objects recognizable as symbols in that they stand ambiguously for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions, and impel organization members to action.

Conceptual Overview

Organizational symbolism arose at the end of the 1970s—almost simultaneously, but independently, on the two sides of the Atlantic—as a marginal and anticonformist movement that radically contested the subject and method of the rationalist and positivist paradigm then dominant in organization studies. Historically, two events, one in the United States and one in Europe, marked the origin of the movement and shaped its essential features.

In May 1979, scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds attended an informal conference held at the home of Louis Pondy in Urbana, Illinois, to explore the implications of symbolism for the study of organizations—a theme unacceptable to official academic conferences at the time. The Urbana conference gave rise to the first academic monograph on the topic (*Organizational Symbolism*), edited by Pondy in 1983, which then became a reference text for the movement's members. In June 1981, during the annual conference of the European Group for Organizational Studies, a group of attendees, disappointed by the hostile reception accorded a paper presented by Per Olof Berg on "Emotional Structures in Organizations," gathered in a Glasgow pub to found the Standing Conference for Organizational Symbolism. In the following decade, this group played a decisive part in the movement's growth and institutionalization in Europe by promoting international conferences, seminars, and publications.

The symbolist movement pursued largely identical purposes in the United States and Europe. Under the dominant paradigm, organizations had hitherto been generally equated to machines, organisms, or economies and studied exclusively in terms of their pragmatic, formal, explicit, and therefore observable aspects. The aim of organizational research was to uncover empirically verifiable relations among behavioral, structural, and environmental variables, for which purpose it used measurement methods and statistical techniques considered proper to scientific research. Vice versa, according to the advocates of the symbolist approach, organizations are fundamentally cultures where instrumental behaviors governed largely by rationality subtly interweave with behaviors expressing feelings, values, and ideologies. The analyst of organizations should therefore not only examine objectively observable events, structures, and processes but also pay attention to the meanings subjectively attributed to them by the members of the organization, and generally to the implicit, informal, and nonrational dimensions of organizational life. If organizations are not social artifacts constructed according to universal principles of rationality, but rather symbolic fields and systems of meaning generated by specific experiences and local cultural dynamics, their study requires the use of qualitative methods and holistic and interpretative models.

If symbols ambiguously stand for a multiplicity of meanings, evoke emotions, and impel action, the essential task of researchers engaged in the analysis of organizations qua symbolic fields is to recognize symbols, decode their meanings, and explain their functions. On the basis of a classification originally proposed by Dandridge and colleagues in 1980, organizational symbols are generally grouped into three categories, to which correspond the three main systems for the expression of cultural values and beliefs: verbal language, the language of behaviors, and the language of artifacts.

When it comes to *verbal symbols*, it should first be mentioned that language as such does have symbolic value given its properties of identifying, distinguishing, categorizing, and structuring experience. Organizational or professional communities that inhabit the same setting, and in which the same language is spoken, may develop specific jargons that reveal their particular vision of the world. The category of verbal symbols also includes an array of linguistic artifacts: anecdotes and stories recounted to newcomers in order to instruct them

on "how things are in this company"; legends, slogans, and the names given to places, persons, and events; and above all, myths. These last can be defined as dramatized accounts of events whose truthfulness is taken for granted or dogmatically asserted and whose effect is to legitimate, idealize, and propose as models the behavior and motives of the protagonist.

Myths usually recount crucial experiences or difficult episodes in organizational life. Idealization of the specific ways in which those experiences have been lived through, and those difficulties overcome, shape everyday routine in periods of stability and suggest how future difficulties should be dealt with. The myths most frequently encountered in organizations pertain to *birth* (myth of origin) or to *changes* induced by traumatic events (for example, the death of the founder, a natural catastrophe, or a severe market crisis). The beliefs and values that myths embody and express often constitute a key component in organizational decision making, even when decisions appear to be taken solely on technical-scientific grounds, and to be conditioned by criteria of instrumental rationality. The more choices are general and considered expressive of the organization's identity, the more they seemingly evade the critical scrutiny of reason and experience, to be instead influenced by organizational myths.

Of particular importance among *symbolic behaviors* are rites and ceremonies, these being collective actions with great emotional resonance, usually performed at regular intervals and in rigorously prescribed modes and sequences. By means of rites and ceremonies, an organizational community celebrates its successes, the heroes responsible for them, and the ideals in whose name they have been achieved. Trice and Beyer propounded a detailed classification of organizational rites and analyzed their manifest and latent sociocultural consequences. The rituals most frequently observed are the following:

- Rites of *passage* (for example, training seminars prior to promotion), which facilitate transition into roles with greater responsibility and prestige.
- Rites of *enhancement* (for example, the awarding of prizes for outstanding performance), which set new standards and induce the organization's members to emulate those who have achieved them.
- Rites of *degradation* (such as the replacement of senior executives who are for some reason deemed unsatisfactory), which solemnly and publicly reaffirm the importance of particular social roles and expose those unworthy of them to public disdain.
- Rites of *integration* (such as annual conventions, anniversary celebrations, Christmas parties), during which differences in power and status are temporarily suspended and feelings of equality are encouraged, although the inevitability and appropriateness of those differences in everyday routine are implicitly reaffirmed.
- Rites of *renewal* (most frequently manifest in companies through the periodic drawing up of strategic plans), which reassure members that the organization is looking to the future and is able to confront it with new drive and new ideas.

A third system of symbols consists of material *artifacts*, that is, the intentional products of human action that exist in an organization independent of their creators and are perceivable through the senses: products, images, buildings, furnishings, modes of structuring physical space. Physical artifacts, given the durability of their materials, may tenaciously and incessantly transmit particular cultural messages and stimuli, favoring the spread and adoption of special modes of feeling in ways all the more efficient because they evade intellectual control.

Critical Commentary and Future Directions

Although the advent of organizational symbolism is generally referred to as the *cultural turn* in organization studies, the movement has not restricted itself to consideration of contemporary organizations as cultures to be studied using the categories and tools of anthropology. It has also forcefully affirmed the importance of a hermeneutic approach and the multidisciplinary study of organizations—with contributions not only from sociology, psychology, and anthropology but also from linguistics, the arts, and literature—eschewing any claim to founding a new orthodoxy. Organizational symbolism has rapidly become one of the main—but also most diversified—currents of thought in organization studies. Today, it is

arguably no longer a current, given that its basic assumptions are widely embraced. And nobody would dispute the academic legitimacy of studying the symbolic dimension of organizations.

But organizational symbolism has also achieved a degree of popularity outside the world of academe that other theories of organization and management have rarely enjoyed. Indeed, the symbolist approach raises research issues of extraordinary practical relevance, which can be summed up in two broad questions: How and why in organizational settings do there arise meanings that enable and facilitate specific courses of action? and, How can they be changed and new ones created when the organization must deal with new problems?

The interest of these questions to any practitioner with managerial responsibilities is evident. And it is also evident that the symbolist approach induces redefinition of the concepts of management and leadership themselves. In 1981, Pfeffer for the first time defined management as symbolic action, and in 1982, Peters and Waterman pointed to the management of meanings and the creation of strong and cohesive cultures as the secret of a firm's success and excellence. Throughout the 1980s, the growing interest in symbolism in the academic literature was paralleled by a diffuse popularization of theoretical findings and by lively discussion, in professional journals and other management-oriented outlets, of their practical implications.

Although, since the beginnings of the symbolist perspective in organization studies, exponents of critical studies have pointed out that every system of meaning establishes and strengthens a particular power structure, encouraging the exploitation of certain individuals and groups by others—and that understanding the manner in which meanings are created may help to emancipate the exploited—the emancipatory potential of the symbolist approach has been largely ignored. Symbolic action has been viewed much more as a control device used by managers to achieve corporate purposes than as a means to emancipate subordinates and other organizational stakeholders endeavoring to understand the extent to which the social constructions of reality that they encounter, and often unwittingly accept, correspond to their needs and are open to question. It should be pointed out, however, that the large body of literature produced to help managers influence and manipulate the symbolic field is susceptible to much criticism because the desire to furnish managers with ready-to-use recipes has led to the simplification and schematization of complex dynamics difficult to reduce to linear explanations. Paradoxically, the more that academic research has highlighted this irreducibility, the more its results have been trivialized in the literature addressed to practitioners.

Toward the end of the 1980s, this frantic endeavor to bend organizational symbolism to managerial purposes subsided. Academic research instead grew more diversified and refined. The trunk of organizational symbolism sprouted new distinct lines of inquiry: the narrative approach, the study of emotions in organizations, and organizational aesthetics. And the critical-emancipatory approach also opened new spaces and found renewed vigor by refraining from generic and preconceived allegations, instead revealing the subtle dynamics by which the symbolic field is constructed. An interesting example of this tendency is the critical and emancipatory exploration of *landscaping* (a concept proposed by Gagliardi in 1996). By landscaping is meant the deliberate creation of a corporate landscape that fosters specific aesthetic experiences. In particular, two studies—one conducted of airline by Hancock and Tyler in 2000 and the other of a hotel chain by Wirz and colleagues in 2003—have shown that the corporate stage is constituted by both material artifacts and human bodies, and that both these elements can be designed and produced as stylized components of a corporate strategy and ideal.

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See also Decision-Making Theory; Emotion; Emotional Patterns in Organizations; Grand Narratives; Narratives; Organizational Culture

Further Readings

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