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Organizational Discourses as Status Symbols

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Abstract. Organizational culture represented as an iceberg (Schein 25) conveys a strong visual message on the visible and invisible layers of organizational values, interactions and rituals.

On-stage and off-stage aspects of organizational life are intertwining and developing gradually both for the insider and for the outsider of a given social system. Organizational socialization is, in fact, the process of individual and group learning aimed at aligning to the values and practices of a given institutional setting (Van Maanen and Schein 3).

The main vehicle of this learning process is language: acquiring key organizational discourses is a tool of socialization, of integration into the new social space. Once acquired, these language practices turn into routines and effective tools of status building (Cunliffe and Shotter 121).

Discourses serve both as tools of integrating newcomers and as cultural markers of status. In order to explore the deep-seated levels of organizational culture, a wide range of convergent approaches is necessary: observation, interviews, questionnaires, and content analysis of organizational documents (Hofstede 5). We propose a framework of understanding an organization's culture and socialization practices through exploring and analyzing leadership discourses.

Keywords: organizational discourses, socialization, status symbols, leadership

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1. Introduction: the context of viewing organizations as cultures

Looking at organizations from a cultural perspective has become a widely accepted approach in the twenty-first century. Globalization, networked society and the dynamic of social change have created a multicultural work environment across the world. Since the last two decades of the twentieth century, scholars and practitioners have approached organizations from the softer perspective of people and their values, as compared to the cybernetic approach of the fifties and the sixties (Scott 409).

Gareth Morgan (119) defined the cultural perspective as one of the many possible metaphors aimed at understanding organizations. The way people think, feel and act can be conceptualized through a set of deep-seated values encompassed by the broader notion of culture. This approach has both strengths and limitations (145). One of the main virtues of the cultural metaphor is that it directs attention to the symbolic significance of organizational life. The second strength of the metaphor is that it shows how organizations are rooted in shared systems of meaning. "The culture metaphor points toward another means of creating and shaping organized activity: by influencing the ideologies, values, beliefs, language, norms, ceremonies and other social practices that ultimately guide social action"(147). There are also dangers and limitations related to viewing and managing organizations as cultures. Managers and organizational development consultants are tempted to perform "values engineering" (150), in order to make employees adhere to a seemingly success oriented ideology. By attempting to manipulate peoples' values and beliefs, managers might create an Orwellian "corporate newspeak" (Morgan 151), and thus endanger individual freedom of organizational actors.

Culture as an organizational phenomenon is, in fact, a process of sense-making, closely related to the socialization of newcomers (Weick 4). However, Weick emphasizes that sensemaking is not a metaphor, as Morgan has put it: instead, it should be understood literally. "Sensemaking is what it says it is, namely, making something sensible" (16). Apart from other explanatory processes such as understanding, interpretation and attribution, sensemaking is grounded in identity construction, has a retrospective orientation, is enactive of sensible environments, and has a strong social, ongoing character. Making sense of the organizational life is "driven by plausability rather than accuracy" (17). We shall highlight two key characteristics of sensemaking: identity construction and retrospective orientation. In terms of identity construction, an individual wears at least two hats within the organization: the personal one, which represents his or her individual values, beliefs and drives, and the organizational one. An individual "not only acts on behalf of the organization in the usually agency sense, but he also acts, more subtly, 'as the organization' when he embodies the values of the collectivity"

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(23). By retrospective sensemaking Weick means the post factum character of understanding organizational acts and processes: "we are conscious always of what we have done, never of doing it" (26). It is what Weick calls "future perfect thinking": present decisions can be made meaningful only in a larger context (29).

Understanding organizations through their values, rituals, norms and actions is strongly related to understanding leadership issues (Hofstede 5). Leaders have a key role in shaping an organization's mainstream culture, whether accepted or not by its members. Charles Handy (1995) developed an integrated theory of organizational cultures and leadership styles, based on power and influence, motivation, learning styles and the way change is engineered (5). A misfit between the organization and its leadership style will end up in cultural confusion and it shows up in extra resources and inefficiency, longer delivery times and an overstaffed head office. There are four types of organizational cultures and each one has a leadership style symbolized by an ancient Greek god.

Club culture, graphically represented as a spider net, is best run by a "Zeus" type of leader. "The relationship with the spider matters more in this culture than does any formal title or position description" (14). Zeus is impulsive, charismatic and concerned with his power. Historically, the club culture is rooted in the small entrepreneurial organization.

The second type of organizational culture is the "role culture," represented as a Greek temple, led by "Apollo": order, rules, and predictability are keywords of such organizations. Apollonian organization and leadership is highly bureaucratic and prescriptive. "In a role culture, you do your job. Neither more nor less" (18).

The third type of organizational culture as described by Handy (21) is the task culture, led by "Athena": it is a problem solving culture, represented as a net, because "it draws resources from various parts of the organizational system in order to focus them on a particular knot or problem" (21). This culture recognizes only expertise as the base of power. Task culture is about teams, whereas role culture is about committees (22). Performance oriented individuals feel at ease in this work environment.

Existential culture led by "Dionysus" is strongly personality oriented, based on the individuals' needs and values, as opposed to the other three cultures, where the individual is subordinated to the organization. Expert partnerships, artists' associations are good examples to illustrate existential culture (Handy 26). An overview of cultures and leadership styles is shown in table 1 (Bakó 93).

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Table 1. Handy's typology of organizational cultures and leadership

	Club culture	Role culture	Task culture	Existential culture
Metaphor	*spider net*	*Greek temple*	*net*	*cluster of stars*
Principle	*will*	*rules*	*tasks*	*trust*
Structure	*hierarchical*	*hierarchical*	*networked*	*flat*
Leadership	***"Zeus"***	***"Apollo"***	***"Athena"***	***"Dionysus"***
Advantage	*reactivity*	*stability*	*performance*	*expertise*
Disadvantage	*authoritarian*	*rigid*	*exigent*	*vulnerable*

There is no receipt in shaping organizational culture and leadership. However, "the choice of gods" (Handy 6) is shaped both by the organization's environment, the national culture and the occupational setting of the organization.

2. Three levels of organizational culture

Edgar Schein (25) has developed an intuitive model of viewing organizations on a three-layer-basis, by picturing them as icebergs. This visual metaphor conveys a strong message on the visible and invisible levels of organizational values, interactions and rituals. It also shows the ways of access to different organizational phenomena:

I. Artifacts. These elements are at the surface: dress, furniture, technology displayed within the organization can be easily perceived, but are quite hard to understand.

II. Espoused values. Beneath artifacts there are "espoused values" which are conscious strategies, goals and philosophies, not so hard to unveil by content analysis of organizational documents, or observing verbal interactions.

III. Basic assumptions and values. The essence of organizational culture is represented by the basic underlying assumptions and values, which are difficult to unveil, because they exist at an implicit level. In order to gain access to these hidden organizational phenomena, triangulation is necessary: a balanced use of different methods, and a carefully considered level of researcher's involvement in deciphering organizational culture, as shown in table 2.

Assessing the three levels of organizational culture provides the key to understanding relationships, decision-making processes, attitudes and behaviors of organizational stakeholders. "The most important lesson for me is that culture is deep, pervasive, complex, patterned, and morally neutral" (Schein 60).

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Table 2. Schein's typology of organizational culture research methods (205):

	Level of Researcher Involvement	
Level of "Subject" Involvement	*Low to Medium* Quantitative	*High* Qualitative
Minimal	Demographics; measurement of "distal" variables	Ethnography: participant observation, content analysis
Partial	Experimentation: tests, questionnaires, ratings	Projective tests, assessments, interviews
Maximal	Total quality tools: statistical analysis, action research	Clinical research, organization development

3. Organizational artifacts as status symbols

Symbols are the building blocks of identity construction in organizations. They are "visible, physical manifestations of organizations and indicators of organizational life" (Rafaeli and Worline 2). Organizational symbols are not easy to decode: due to their polisemic nature, the meaning attributed by researchers often differ from the set of meanings attributed by key organizational stakeholders. Symbols play four main functions in organizations: they act as reflections of organizational culture; they trigger internalized values and norms; they frame conversations about organizational experience, and, last but not least, they are integrators of organizational systems of meaning (2-3). When talking about organizational symbolism, it is important to distinguish symbolic representations from symbolic actions. While symbolic representations are related to the sensorial set of symbols, symbolic actions comprise the organizational actors' dynamic of activity and their hidden, decodable meanings (4). However, Rafaeli and Worline do not explain how symbolic representations and symbolic actions are related to each other.

Elsbach remarked that physical markers might be perceived as symbols of social and personal identities of corporate employees: environmental psychology, organizational identity inquiry and impression management were equally interested in decoding the message conveyed by offices' objectual world. Environmental psychology has examined symbolic effects of office design and furnishings. "A review of this research suggests that physical markers in corporate settings may signal and affirm an employee's identity by defining his or her status and distinctiveness categorization" (63). An office's size and location, the number of windows and the quality of furnishings indicate the organizational actor's rank, prestige, and status. Research suggests that status markers have little impact on performance, and yet "perceived inequalities in status markers evoke both strong emotional reactions from employees and calls for changes in markers for more appropriate levels" (64). Moreover, attempts to remove status markers and to level

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the playfield in organizations resulted in improvised means to show one's organizational rank, by negotiating the number of personal items to be displayed, according to status (65).

However, we should not overstate our ability to decode messages conveyed by physical artifacts. The process of symbolic mediation is complex and often misleading: in a conservative environment, one is tempted to hide elements that seem inappropriate, such as a hidden tattoo. By the same token, using inadequate and conspicuous status symbols, an organizational actor might create the impression of a higher status. People use symbols to reveal both how they are different from and how they are similar to others (Pratt and Rafaeli 10). Physical symbols enact relationships and convey messages on organizational identity and status (12). "Thus, a CEO who uses an expensive car or wears an expensive suit is claimed to *be powerful*. Yet, the use of a symbol is meaningless if there is no audience to the initiating move" (12). Language is a socially constructed system of complex, intertwined meanings. Pulling out a singular symbol and analyzing it out of its context would distort the whole picture of identity construction in organizations: "the study of symbols needs to go beyond discrete treatment of the meaning of *individual* symbols to looking at *patterns* of symbols" (Pratt and Rafaeli 13). Objects do not only mediate identity construction process in organizations, they not only function as extensions of self and raw materials of self-construction processes, but they equally convey messages on actor's status, rank, formal and informal position within given institutional settings. While individuals use symbols in order to *identify* themselves with a given organization's set of values, organizations put forward their set of identifiers in order to *assimilate* the individual as much as possible (15). There are four types of organizational status symbols, according to the Pratt and Rafaeli interpretation scheme (3):

(a) dress and personal adornment;
(b) physical landscape and office design;
(c) technology (computers, phones, cars) and
(d) dramaturgical props (letterhead, diplomas, awards).

When analyzing these types of symbols, two main dimensions should be taken into consideration: *instrumentality* and *portability* (4). Instrumentality refers to the usefulness of a given object (chair versus diploma), whereas portability refers to the ease with which a given status symbol can be transported (laptop versus chair). Physical symbols enact organizational relationships in a complex manner, which might give "translation problems," according to Pratt and Rafaeli (24): today's organizations use more and more instrumental and portable status symbols, and they attempt to blur status differences in order to empower organizational actors.

At the same time, accidental signaling, strategically ambiguous signaling, complex relationship signaling are elements which make it hard to decode the web of meanings conveyed by organizational artifacts. Even an insider might be lost in

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this labyrinth. However, individual actors can take action in order to overcome status symbol translation problems, by symbol *intensification*, symbol *redundancy*, symbol *reduction* and symbol *transformation* (31). Symbol intensification refers to a more conspicuous use of artifacts, whereas symbol redundancy is meant to reiterate the use of artifacts, by buying more cell phones for instance. Symbol reduction means eliminating those artifacts which blur the status message one plans to convey (e.g., avoiding to wear a T-shirt that everyone wears at the company). Symbol transformation refers to the process of reshaping the message conveyed by a given organizational artifact, for instance, by reinterpreting keywords used in the organization, in a way that makes it more straightforward to stakeholders. Pratt and Rafaeli conclude:

> With regard to identity issues, physical symbols suggest that individuals are distancing themselves from their organizations either completely (e.g., disidentifying) or partially (e.g., identifying with multiple identities). Organizations, in turn, legitimate some of this distancing by using physical symbols to preach identity plurality. With regard to status issues, organizations either completely or partially (leveling or ambivalently maintaining) remove messages about status hierarchy as empowerment enters their symbolic rhetoric. (33)

Organizational artifacts play an important role both in shaping identity and revealing status, rank and hierarchy of an individual in a given social setting.

4. Discourse and socialization

On-stage and off-stage aspects of organizational life are intertwining and developing gradually both for the insider and for the outsider of a given social system. Organizational socialization is, in fact, the process of individual and group learning aimed at aligning to the values and practices of a given institutional setting (Van Maanen and Schein 2-3): this does not mean "that the transfer of a particular work culture from generation to generation of organizational participants occurs smoothly, quickly, and without evolutionary difficulty". Such apprenticeship can be considered a lifelong experience, and, at best, a process of acquiring rules of proper organizational behavior. In order to do this, newcomers have to learn the functional and social requirements of their newly assumed roles (Van Maanen and Schein 8). Organizational learning does not occur in a social vacuum: colleagues, superiors, subordinates, clients and other key stakeholders guide newcomers within the labyrinth of rules, rituals, hidden assumptions and accepted practices of an institution.

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The more integrated one is, the closer he or she is to the center of the organization. In the case of highly informal organizations, such as "club culture" and "existential culture" (Handy 14-26), the more socialized an individual is, the closer s/he is to the leader. Van Maanen and Schein (20) defined several levels of organizational socialization, from the less integrated outsider to the most integrated central positioned figure, as shown in table 3.

Table 3. Van Maanen and Schein's inclusionary domains of organizations (20):

Levels of Organizational Actors' Inclusion	
Role	*Position*
Central figure	Leader
Confidant	Tenure granted
Confederate	Permanent membership
Proviso member	Accepted but not permanent
Newcomer	
Outsider	No position yet

Before a newcomer becomes integrated in a given organization, s/he has to be tested in terms of abilities, motives and values. If acceptable by others and by the rules of the game, an individual may pass from the outsider's, then the newcomer's position to the more inclusionary status of a proviso member. This status gives him or her access to organizational secrets, hidden assumptions and expectations, and to the difference between "presentational rhetoric used on outsiders to speak of what goes on in the setting from the operational rhetoric used by insiders to communicate with one another as to the matters-at-hand" (Van Maanen and Schein 21). Thus, the language use of an organizational member functions as a marker of his or her level of socialization, his or her centrality.

By analyzing leaders' discourses, we can assess the way they conceptualize cultural norms, expectations, assumptions, and detect topic areas of presentational rhetoric. By analyzing members' discourses and comparing them with the leader's discursive practices, we can assess the areas of overlapping and the levels of congruence in terms of presentational rhetoric. In order to assess operational rhetoric, observation and internal document analysis is necessary, since we are in the position of outsiders of the organization. The more "insider talk" we find, the higher organizational status we may hypothesize. Language is, thus, both a tool of socialization and a marker of status and identity. Once acquired, these language practices turn into routines and effective tools of status building (Cunliffe and Shotter 121). Discursive practices function therefore as status symbols.

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5. Conclusion: organizational discourses as status symbols

Research on organizational culture is informative because we are flooded by status symbols (Bakó 2). Organizational discourse analysis gives us clues to identity building processes and key actors' status. By using observation, leadership style survey, content analysis of leaders' versus members' interviews, complemented with organizational document analysis, we gain access to the difference between presentational rhetoric and operational rhetoric of an organization. Applying Schaffers' methodology on "ordinary language interviews" (150) we can map and explore the way organizational members relate to the three levels of organizational culture, and get closer to an interpretive approach on the way they conceptualize status and identity (Yanow 41).

The keywords interviewees should explore have to relate to the focus of our analysis and to the conceptual framework we use. In our case, if we conceptualize leadership through the lenses of Handy's theory ("Zeus," "Apollo," "Athena," "Dionysus"), we might choose keywords like "power," "status," "success," "task" and "excellence". We should then confront leadership and membership responses on the chosen keywords, and all this presentational rhetoric with the daily discursive practices. The wider the gap, the weaker the organizational culture is.

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