

To Kent Moore
November 4, 1964—September 1, 1989

Reframing Organizational Culture

edited by

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Culture Is the Medium of Life

BARBARA CZARNIAWSKA-JOERGES

The cultural frame of analysis brings to organizational studies both new freedoms and new constraints. Like every other frame, it helps to reveal and focus certain phenomena by neglecting and covering others, a fact that we failed to observe enjoying the new vistas. Also, while playing on the new meadows, we took some time to notice that some of our friends disappeared, even if they promised to meet us in the place we all thought we knew. The cultural frame of reference turned out to be many frames, sometimes dramatically different from one another.

Now that the first wave of enthusiasm is over, the disappointed can start looking for a better perspective while those who are still satisfied can lean back and look critically at what they do. The task is, however, not to detect all the flaws and arrive at the perfect perspective for organization studies, but to reflect on the one we are using as one of many—but the one we happen to cherish and find useful. For quite some time we defended it by attacking competitors. Now it is time to make use of all the constructive criticisms which have been provided and to start the process of self-reflection, to become less defensive and more creative.

This chapter is one attempt at such reflection. It is built along the following lines: two definitional kinds of concepts have been used in culture studies and form the backbone of my discussion. They are the ostensive and performative definitions of cultural phenomena. The ostensive definition, a more traditional type, forms a reference point for the bulk of literature well known to the readers. My focus is, however, on a performative definition of cultural phenomena which, I believe, needs to

be developed and attended to. This definitional construction is then used to frame, first, the very processes of organizing and, second, the wider phenomena in which organizing is inevitably embedded. Next, organizing is seen in a three-dimensional perspective, composed of interacting symbolic, practical and political aspects, as illustrated by examples of studies conducted within the cultural perspective. The embeddedness, or the cultural context, is then analyzed, both in relation to organizing as such and to theorizing about it. A self-reflective note on interpreting research itself as a cultural experience, closes the discussion pointing toward meta-levels of reflection.

Ostensive Versus Performative Definitions of Culture

Bruno Latour (1986) analyzed the present state of sociology and its possible developments by contrasting two definitions of society: an ostensive and a performative one. The same operation can be performed on definitions of culture, not to achieve yet another classification but to highlight the consequences of adopting any given kind of definition.

The ostensive definition of culture assumes that, in principle, it is possible to discover properties that are typical for a given culture and that could explain its evolution, although in practice they might be difficult to detect. The performative definition admits that it is impossible in principle to describe properties characterizing any given culture, but in practice (with a given purpose at hand, Schütz, 1964/1979) it is possible to do so.

Actors, be they individuals or groups, live in the culture as ostensively defined. Even if they are active, their actions are restricted because they are only a part of a larger pattern. If, however, culture is to be performatively defined, it is the actors who in practice define—both for themselves and for others—what culture is, what it contains, what is the whole, and what are the parts.

In searching for an ostensive definition, actors are “useful informants,” but because they are simply a part of a larger pattern, they must not be relied upon too much as they never see the whole pattern themselves. “The whole pattern” in the formative definition is, however, what is perceived by the actors as the whole pattern in their action-oriented cultural lives and, therefore, there are no actors who know “less” or “more” compared to each other and to the researcher. People’s knowledge is the basis for their practical action and thus is of interest to the researcher.

The search for an ostensive definition assumes that, with a proper methodology, social scientists can eventually sort out the actors’ opinions, beliefs, and behaviors so as to complete the whole picture. Within the realm of the performative definitions, however, it is obvious that social scientists raise the same questions as any other actors although they might use a different rhetoric in formulating their answers. The chosen rhetoric is, further, a practical way of enforcing their understanding of what culture is about, analogous to other practical ways used by other actors (McCloskey, 1985/1986).

Thus, ostensive definitions are attempts to explain principles, whereas performative definitions explore practices. In what follows, I would plead for shifting from principle to practice in cultural studies of organizations. To paraphrase Latour once more, one could say that culture “is not the referent of an ostensive definition discovered by social scientists despite the ignorance of their informants. Rather it is performed through everyone’s efforts to define it” (Latour, 1986, p. 273).

Let me begin with one performative definition of culture (naturally, there are many possible) which I find useful in approaching organizations. In the most general sense, culture can be viewed as a bubble (of meaning) covering the world, a bubble that we both create and live within. Its film covers everything that we turn our eye to; it is, as stated in the title, the medium of (social) life.

What about Nature, though? (The generality of the above definition calls for the use of capitals). Contrasting Nature with Culture makes sense only within what Latour (1989) calls “our Modern Constitution.” The Modern Constitution asserts simultaneously the nonhuman origin of knowledge (our impressions and cognitive maps), and the complete separation between the two (in order to hear the voice of Nature, we must fight against voices which originate in our heads). In his outline of an Amodern Constitution, Latour proposes to collapse the third element (the complete separation) while preserving the first two, albeit with a changed status. Accordingly, Latour proposes to tackle Nature and Culture as consequences of a given scientific practice, prominent during the Modern Times. This means that Nature and Culture can be seen as results of interpretive practices, usually called “the scientific method” but which might be more appropriately called “an anthropological practice.” To come back to my definition, then, culture covers all such interpretive practices: both those that call for the separation of the two poles and those that propose to collapse them; those that search for ostensive definitions and those that are satisfied with performative ones.

Such an all-encompassing definition allows us to establish the starting point, but in order to proceed further, more detailed exploration of this definition of framework is needed.

Organizations as Cultural Phenomena

One of the most handy performative definitions of culture is one used for many years in anthropology; *culture is a way of life* (Leach, 1982). Large and complex organizations are among the most characteristic contemporary ways of structuring our time and attention. In this they are complemented by a host of small business organizations, voluntary organizations, interest organizations, and so forth. Western countries are organized societies (Perrow, 1989). From this perspective, organizations are cultural phenomena themselves, rather than "arenas for cultural phenomena" or sites of "organizational cultures."

The original recognition of that fact came across most visibly in the wave of organizational symbolism (see especially Barry Turner, 1971, for the early examples). The symbolic meaning of organizational practices was brought to the fore with feelings of exhilaration resulting from an "aha" experience which both confirms what we already knew and gives it a meaningful form, a convincing figure emerging from a well-known ground. But the symbolic focus carried us into forgetting other figures that might possibly be made out of the same ground and, hopefully, combined into a three-dimensional picture. In my view, these three thickly interwoven dimensions are: *the symbolic, the practical, and the political* (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990). Following are the examples of research attempting to reveal the complexity of organizations as cultural phenomena.

The Symbolic: Budget as Conversation

Budgeting was one of the first organizing processes that was taken under a symbolist magnifying glass. Conventional studies of budget processes were repeatedly bringing in confusing results. Although budgets are considered to be important control instruments, especially in public sector organizations, the observed practices reported a steady discrepancy between the budgetary statements and the subsequent activity. Also contrary to the assumption that budget processes were arenas for important decisions, empirical studies revealed that budgets usually confirmed decisions made elsewhere. A study of a Norwegian municipality led Johan P. Olsen

(1970) to interpret the budget process as a ritual. Budgeting did not serve to turn values and demands into concrete activities, but to strengthen these values and ideas related to them. Olsen saw budgeting as a ritualistic act venerating reason as the basis of organizational activity.

This observation opened a new perspective on the process of budgeting, until then seen exclusively within a directly instrumental perspective. A budget can still be seen as fulfilling many important functions, but not those that were traditionally ascribed to it. I can serve to communicate a stand in a political debate without a need to formulate an explicit stance (Czarniawska-Joerges & Jacobsson, 1989). The budget techniques can be reformed to signal that public sector organizations are following the demands of modernity (Czarniawska-Joerges & Jacobsson, 1989). In general, budgeting creates many communicative opportunities, both inside and outside organizations.

The studies of budgeting practices convincingly illustrated the usefulness of the cultural frame of reference. Capable of grasping the functional aspect of organizational action, additional possibilities for examining the existential aspects of organizational life were created. At the same time, the cultural frame of reference seemed less prone to dangers of reductionism, stressing complexity and interconnections rather than imposing a single view on any organizational process. This advantage can be clearly observed in new studies of organizational technology, together with dangers ensuing from relying too heavily on novel aspects of the phenomena as opposed to the well-known ones.

The Practical: Computers as Animals, Actors, But Also as Tools

It could be claimed that it was Braverman (1974) who visualized the computer as a political actor, rather than just a tool. But it is cultural analysis that recognized that this most characteristic piece of organizational machinery can acquire a variety of complex attributes. Depending on the emotional attitude towards the computers, they are seen as bats—or as butterflies (Joerges, 1989). For the true aficionados, however, this was not enough. Marvin Minsky (1986) declared that computers are our true children, our biological children, being, really, the progeny of dinosaurs (in an interview with a German Film-maker, Peter Weiss; "Machine Dreams," 1988). With less love but equal radicalism, the "new sociology of technology" proposes to conceive of computers as social actors. Steve Woolgar (1985), for instance, claimed that "we need to eschew approaches that are unnecessarily parasitic of participants' dichotomies, and develop

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a sociological approach which takes as its focus the human/mechanical language community, the community composed of 'expert machines and machine experts' " (p. 568). One can see this program as a historical reversal of its predecessor: the man-machine system. Where the former sinned by mechanizing humans, the latter makes it good by humanizing machines.

Whether one likes the new sociology of technology or not, it is obvious that new machinery, especially microelectronic control technologies, plays an important role in unscaling organizational complexities. Organizational actors and researchers alike feel that they must go along with these changes, and this necessitates resymbolizations. Some of the new symbols help to create new realities; some, alas, help to reproduce the old ones. Computers are often projected as splendid male creatures, speaking friendly and patronizingly to their female users. This reinforcement of traditional gender and occupational roles is apparent in early marketing images of the machines (Joerges, 1989).

Although symbolic aspects of technology are given full attention, the political aspects are noticed, not surprisingly, somewhat less often. But truly flabbergasting is the fact that the most obvious, that is, practical aspects of computers (machines do work!), are relatively least noticed (Joerges, 1988). The cultural frame of reference should ensure that we do not neglect the practical aspect of all organizational actions, beginning with the machines.

The Political: Power as an Experiential Construct

The political aspect is sometimes perceived as imposed on organizations by conflict-minded researchers; the consensus perspective does not see any need for political interpretations of organizational life. However, people in organizations talk about power. They certainly did in several studies which I conducted in various organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988b) even though I never asked them about it. They used the concept to interpret the significance of actions—their own and other people's—which they were describing. This provided a legitimate reason to ask students of business administration in different countries for accounts of organizational events that they experienced as related to organizational power (Czarniawska-Joerges & Kranas, in press).

In ostensive definitions of organizational power, "power" is one of those organizational attributes, influencing factors, or "structures" whose existence we take for granted. Consider, for example, the famous definition of

power by Berle (1967): "Power invariably fills one vacuum in human organization. As between chaos and power, the latter always prevail" (p. 37). If, however, we assume that organizations are constantly being made (the bubble of culture is constantly reproduced), that we are actually dealing with processes of "organizing" (Weick, 1969/1979), power also becomes something that is being constructed rather than located at the outset of organizational action together with other "attributes." What students related in our study were the ways organizations are being made, and "power" was one of the results which varied according to the variability found in other organizational processes. The students did not come up with a common "definition" of power, nor were we able to deduce one from what they said. The study made it perfectly clear that the students' definitions were performative ones; they built them in accordance with their experience and the accessible rhetoric. The differences in definitions reflected different ways of (organizational) life.

How to account for these variations in a more systematic fashion? In the above examples I avoided introducing the issue of context, in order to be able to concentrate on it more fully in what follows.

Cultural Context of Organizing

Still another way of conceptualizing culture in the performance mode (which I see as alternative but not competitive to the one used in the previous section) is that of *culture as a thought world* (Douglas, 1986). This way of understanding culture makes sense especially when we turn to processes and phenomena that happen beyond our perception although we speculate about them. An ostensive definition would most likely introduce concepts like "nation cultures"; however, all that we have said until now indicates that there is no way (or, rather, no use) to delimit concrete units of analysis or to establish borders between them. Yet we need a concept that will help us to extend our analysis of organizational practices into something that is bigger than themselves, but made of the same fabric, something that is an extension of those practices rather than another ontological unit that can be contracted with it (like in the dichotomy "organizational versus environment"). A concept which I find useful is a *cultural context of organizing* which can be understood as an historically formed network of organizational and social processes and systems of values and beliefs (Czarniawska, 1986; Hofstede & Boddewyn, 1977). A thought world, shared by a time-and-space collective (Sellerberg, 1987)—

containing constructs conceived with the purpose of making sense of certain events—can be seen as a collection of texts in making, some of which deal with organizing whereas others do not. Undoubtedly, however, the texts on organizing influence the other texts and in turn are influenced by them. Let us have a look at how such links are formed and how they operate.

Myths, Prophecies, and Other Linking Practices

From 1978 to 1982 I conducted a study of control relationships between central headquarters and the companies in retail businesses in Poland and the United States (Czarniawska, 1985a). Later, I studied analogous relationships between central public agencies and ministries in Sweden (1985b). The study was designed along conventional lines, and except for a traditional “cross-cultural comparison,” no conscious cultural perspective was adopted. The cultural frame of reference invited itself.

I asked my interlocutors at all levels a variety of questions, but never one which was nevertheless always answered: what makes organizations effective? These spontaneous utterances formed patterns, which I called the *myths of origin of organizational effectiveness* (assuming, after Cohen, 1969, that myth is a narrative of sacred quality which, by offering a dramatized version of origins of transformations, provides a socially shared explanation of important phenomena).

The myths presented remained in a strong but negative relationship to organizational practices as described by the same actors. On the other hand, they were positively related to shared cultural traditions, such as societal values, history, and other myths. The myths narrated by the U.S. general managers and Swedish general directors had roots in the official version of the history of the two countries, whereas the Polish managing directors related a myth based on an idealized version of U.S. reality.

All of these myths reflected certain important societal values, maybe those which are most challenged by everyday practices. Thanks to the fact that myths help to save important values, organizational control can follow a pattern that is demanded by various contingencies. Other symbolic acts help to mediate the discrepancy between what is believed and what is perceived (on mediatory myths, see Abravanel, 1983). Consequently, each myth has its supporting rituals, actions that symbolically confirm the contents of the myths (for example, organizational ceremonies, public speeches, and the like). Ideologies, on the other hand, interpret the present state of affairs, offer a vision of the future (alluding to a myth or a

prophecy), and formulate a prescription of how to obtain it (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988a). One should add here that prophecies are narrations of the same character as myths, but are future-oriented. Indeed, the myth of origins of organizational effectiveness as related by the Polish managers turned recently into a prophecy: as Felix Rohatyn put it, the Eastern and Central European countries tried to reshape themselves into an idealized version of U.S. reality (Rohatyn, 1990).

A variety of symbolic acts links present organizational practices to their cultural context, extending from the (commonly represented) past to the (commonly dreamed) future. Because there are many myths and prophecies available at any point in time, fashions play a selective role, indicating which myths and prophecies are “in” and which are “out,” directing the traffic of ideas within and between contexts.

The Travels of Ideas

Readers who consider fashion to be too frivolous a mechanism to be included into the organizational theory discourse should ask themselves a question: How is it possible that the same or very similar ideas materialize in many organizations, often very distant in space, at the same time? A wave of decentralization reforms that reached Swedish municipalities between the years 1977–1988 touched many local governments profoundly, some perfunctorily, and others not at all (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1988a). Somewhat later, most regions in Sweden built up a new unit whose aim was to improve regional cooperation between the research and education institutions on one side and business companies on the other, but they all denied any central influence upon them and claimed that the idea came to them quite independently (Beckman, 1987).

Idea-spreading is often discussed with the help of the concept of *diffusion* (Rogers, 1962; for a recent review see Levitt & March, 1988). This chemical metaphor leaves, however, the mechanism of the phenomenon unexplored. We can possibly agree that ideas move from “more satiated” to “less satiated” contexts, but how do they travel? Even if ideas become reified in common thinking, most physical laws still do not apply. We must look for a social mechanism of spreading and *fashion* seems to be the most suitable (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990).

One attempt to defend the concept of fashion from the taint of frivolity is to discuss it in highly idealistic terms, something like Zeitgeist. In the present context it is more natural to concentrate on its commercial aspect: fashion is a social mechanism which influences the market and distorts the

demand and supply curves. It consists in a collective choice among tastes, things, ideas orientated towards finding what is typical for a given time (Blumer, 1973).

Often following fashion feels like a duty—fashion is the expression of what is *modern*, and it is a duty, especially for people in high organizational positions, to bring progress into organizations. Following fashion can be, in a company, a way of keeping up with the competition, and in public administration a way of keeping up with the times in the interest of the mandator. But other aspects must be emphasized as well. Fashion always has a function of releasing from responsibility (Sellerberg, 1987). In fact, fashion is a highly paradoxical phenomenon. Georg Simmel observed that fashion allows to conform to what is commonly accepted and at the same time to experiment with something new: to be alike *and* to be different (Simmel, 1973).

In this sense fashion stands for change, as opposed to tradition. Tarde, the classic of imitation analysis, contrasted the control of the “timeless society” (tradition) with the control of “times we live in,” a fashion within a time-collective, as Sellerberg (1987) interprets it.

Not all organizational ideas, however, that are around at a given time are tried out by all organizations. Fashion has its boundaries, and time-collective is also a space-collective. How to delineate, for performative purposes, its ever shifting boundaries? A useful way might be to follow the processes of structuration of organizational fields (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Giddens, 1979). An increase of interactions among certain organizations, an emergence of interorganizational structures of domination and coalition, a shared information, and, finally, a development of “field consciousness”—that is, an awareness of belonging to the same thought world—indicate the time and space boundaries where a collective selects among a common repertoire of ideas.

Local Theories of Organization

It would be absurd to assume that organization researchers themselves operate free of a cultural context of any kind; rather, it is only too obvious that we, too, belong to various thought worlds. Paradigms reflect fashions in the professional time-collective, but the space-collective also leaves its mark.

An often repeated criticism challenged the imperialism of the U.S. organization theory (see for example Mrela & Kostecki, 1981), although interestingly enough, many classic works (Etzioni, 1961; March & Simon,

1958; Perrow, 1976/1986) contain a warning that the interpretations they proffer are derived from and valid for U.S. organizations. The alleged imperialism, then, is at least partly due to the willingness on the part of recipients to accept the U.S. organization theory as universal. This phenomenon can be read as a part of a general McDonaldization of the contemporary world, but also as instrumental in an attempt to universalize other local organization theories (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1987). Consequently, one can observe a Scandinavianization of decision-making studies, a Europeanization of cultural studies, and a Canadianization of strategy-oriented research, to coin a few examples.

A postulate of full rights for local organization theories, as opposed to a search for the universal organization theory, may be read as parochialism. But nothing is further from my intentions in postulating it; indeed, there is no way to understand local practices without gaining understanding of the nonlocal, or different local practices. The universal human nature, provided it exists (or rather, can be constructed as another ostensive definition), would be of a very limited use in concrete organizations. On the other hand, knowledge of other practices and other interpretations, indeed, the awareness of other thought worlds, can only deepen the understanding of the phenomena at hand (Geertz, 1988b) and increase our solidarity both with the community we live in and communities that are alien to us (Rorty, 1989). Additionally, the exchange of local interpretations can lead to an accumulation of interpretive concepts and practices, rather than accumulations of positive statements concerning organizations.

What we called “the Viking organization theory” (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1987) is a good example. The Scandinavian based organization studies extended the decision-making frame of reference to action theory. Decisions are to be understood in the light of actions and vice versa. This extension of the theoretical perspective revealed the usefulness of diversified definitions of rationality, composed in a performative mode. One can speak about decision rationality, action rationality, and the reciprocal rationality of decision and action (Brunsson, 1985). But woe to those who will treat these definitions as ostensive and try to adopt them literally in a different context. In organizations different from those that provided the ground for the Viking theory (for example, private sector rather than public sector and non-Scandinavian organizations) the action-decision ratio is differently shaped and interpreted. A definition that has a high performative value for a researcher (and in context of the mainstream career, the ostensive definitions, have, paradoxically, the highest performative value)

might be of no use for a practitioner. Changing contexts should help us to understand this phenomenon and to make wise use of it.

Research as Cultural Experience

All that has been said points to the value of anthropologically inspired methods in understanding organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1990). But isn't it so that anthropology's internal taboo forbids the study of one's own culture? In spite of the risk of being accused of being old-fashioned, says Leach (1985), it is his duty to remind the anthropologists about the dangers of studying the culture of one's origins: unproblematic acculturation prevents true perceptiveness.

Obviously, the culture-as-bubble notion cannot accommodate such a proscription, as it eschews the concept of borders and delineating differences. Not so the other two conceptualizations: culture-as-a-way-of-life and culture-as-a-thought-world. Shouldn't we be always studying others' ways of life and alien thought worlds, as it could not have been the fish who discovered the water? Taken literally, the warning would only apply to self-reflective studies, and enough has been said to defend the legitimacy of such studies. (See for example the collections of readings edited by Clifford & Marcus, 1986, or Woolgar, 1988.) Let us then move to what is conventionally meant by this criticism: the taking for granted of "one's own culture."

In the first place, the way of life of most organizations, with the exception of those that we belong to, is not at all the same as our way of life (Sunday, 1981). Second, it is an illusion that we can escape our thought world and immerse ourselves, naked of prejudice, into another one. The best we can do is to expand our thought world by understanding the possibility of other worlds or "subuniverses of meaning" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Rather than fight the battle on what is the legitimate object of study in cultural studies, I propose to focus on seeing research practice as a cultural practice, in literal and metaphorical sense.

Research activity consists of abandoning the taken-for-grantedness of organizational life in order to problematize practices of organizational actors. However, doing so, it soon becomes clear that this is not a one-way process. With the possible exception of cases where powerful self-defenses are used, problematizing what other people do provokes the reverse action: our own practices are problematized in turn. As long as we "play native" we can get acceptance in strange worlds, but not understanding of them.

"Playing native" requires a non-problematic stance towards what is happening, taking for granted of what-is.) If we want the understanding, we must ask; by posing questions, we problematize; by problematizing, we reveal ourselves as not really belonging.

All would be well if the natives came with answers as required; alas, they tend to come with questions or incomprehensible answers that challenge the original question. Our own practices become problematic; and inevitably, our identity comes into question when, rather than being taken for granted, we are challenged to recreate our identity in an unfamiliar setting. Most people do not know what organization researchers do; many of them have some images that we fail to recognize or accept, as they come from mass media, idiosyncratic encounters with other representatives of our species, or analogies from natural sciences. Cultural colonialism is one possible way of dealing with such a situation but, especially on the home grounds, it is hard to establish a basis for a superiority claim that would survive. The way out is to retreat, or to enter a dialogue on negotiated conditions.

Let me end with a literary example of such a dialogue, to be found in David Lodge's (1989) novel, *Nice Work*. The two main characters, Vic and Robyn are natives of what they believe is the same world, the contemporary British culture. Their forced encounter reveals them to each other as strangers, inhabiting worlds that never meet: that of men, industry, and conservative politics as opposed to that of women, academia, and radical politics. Their paths crossed by chance: somebody "up there" came upon an idea that the university people might benefit from observing the industrial managers at work. The protagonists' first reaction to the confrontation is an urge to colonialize: each is certain of the superiority of their own world and the inevitability of the other's falling for it. Alas, the antagonists are equally formidable and a new way must be forged. Humbly and hesitantly, they learn from and about each other, in this way learning about themselves. The novel's happy ending does not have to be seen as a testimony of what usually happens; rather, it is a sketch of an ideal that might be impossible, but still remains attractive. We live in multiple strange worlds whose colonization is quite impossible; why not accept their existence and make ourselves more familiar with them?

The cultural perspective emerges in this light as more than just a choice of an attractive research paradigm. Rather, it is a necessary step to understand the multiple realities of the postmodern world, where organizations are both the major producers and the main products of these realities.