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Felice D. Billups

Johnson & Wales University - Providence, fbillups@jwu.edu

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Exploring Organizational Culture Through Metaphor Analysis

Felice D. Billups

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

Alan Shawn Feinstein Graduate School

Center for Research & Evaluation

Johnson & Wales University

How would you describe your campus culture or your school environment? Would you carefully outline the details of the working conditions, the way people interact in meetings, or the unique communication style of your organization? Or would you rather use a descriptive phrase, or even a metaphor, to summarily reveal your organization's culture?

Metaphor analysis, as a means to uncover organizational culture, is an increasingly popular strategy for qualitative researchers. In interpretative qualitative studies, metaphors comprise a form of linguistic analysis which assists researchers who are interested in an intensive but short-term evaluation of organizational culture (Patton, 2002; Schmitt, 2005). Since language serves as a pivotal cultural artifact, metaphors emerge from that sphere as a particularly expressive language form.

Metaphors behave as powerful forms of organizational language because they communicate symbolic meaning beyond the obvious content of the words. They help people make sense of their environment, organize information, and resolve apparent conflicts and contradictions. Schmitt (2005) and Wittnk (2011) identify metaphor analysis as means of securing imagery that mirrors organizational culture at many levels. As a linguistic cultural artifact, metaphors facilitate an individual's disclosure of his or her surroundings, allowing for imaginative and emotional descriptions while serving as a safeguard that avoids more direct or confrontational language. For example, if an individual uses the metaphor "like a zoo" or "it is a sinking ship" to describe their working environment, those words provide specific clues as to the emotional and cultural context of the organization, without compromising the vulnerability of the respondent.

Language remains an absolutely integral and complex element of organizational culture. Every culture, discipline, organization, profession, and educational institution possesses its own unique set of conceptual components and elements from which its language or jargon originates. Consequently, language represents the concepts, beliefs, norms, values and practices of the culture, and affects the way people think about things (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hofstede, Bond, & Chung-leung, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Smircich, 1985).

Numerous qualitative studies employ interviewing as a means to assess cultural artifacts and conditions. Metaphor analysis, as part of the interview process, is one device that elicits individual perceptions, thereby providing a more appropriate perspective for the study of the dimensions of culture (Smircich, 1983; Tierney, 1988; Trice & Morand, 1991). Traditional studies of organizations and cultural artifacts, oriented toward quantification of rationally conceived patterns, cannot adequately capture the dynamics of culture (Gibson, 2006; Tierney, 2008). This innovative qualitative research method provides an effective means of identifying the perceptions of cultural participants, the characteristics of their cultural surroundings, and the degree of experience and social integration in that culture (Cameron & Quinn, 2006).

This type of research, therefore, relies primarily on people's words and impressions as the primary source of data. Through an interviewee's self-disclosures and the use of descriptive phrases, cultural values, beliefs and issues emerge. Respondents suggest how an organization perceives itself, how its members view themselves, how others view them, and how the organization accomplishes goals, hence implying organizational direction and distinction. Two specific strategies support the process of eliciting metaphors: (a) the use of key words or phrases in a free association exercise (i.e., suggesting the words "student" or "campus community" and asking interviewees to respond with the first word or phrase that comes to mind), and (b) the use of guiding phrases to prompt metaphors (e.g., "this institution operates like...").

Thomas (1949) proposes that the study of people demands to know just how people define the situation in which they find themselves. Schein (2010) contends that "we simply cannot understand organizational phenomena without considering culture

both as a cause and as a way of explaining such phenomena" (p. 311). In other words, to understand the issue of culture, it seems appropriate simply to question participants on how they view their worlds, with subsequent analysis of the resulting data.

For these reasons, a connection develops between a choice of methods and the major research questions. A qualitative study values participant perspectives on their worlds, seeks to discover those perspectives, and views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participant. Each qualitative method approach assumes that systematic inquiry must occur in a natural setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002), while Moustakas (1994) and Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe how data unite through depth interviewing and how they associate with identified domains of understanding. As Thomas (1949) states, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p. 301).

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