

THE INTERPRETIVE PERSPECTIVE: VIEWING ORGANIZATIONS AS CULTURES

As we have noted, the interpretive approach grew out of opposition to traditional, functional perspectives of social science, where “scientific” approaches were used. In the interpretive perspective, patterns of coordinated behavior between individuals are emphasized. The focus is upon how individuals subjectively shape their *own* social reality. Interpretivists believe that reality is socially constructed through the words, symbols, and behaviors of organizational members. As such, the interpretive perspective allows us to highlight our understanding of communication processes in the organization because it provides us the opportunity to study how people actively make sense of their words.

The interpretivist approach became particularly appealing to researchers of organizational communication because, by treating organizations as individuals’ social constructions of reality, researchers saw organizing as a process of *communicating* (Putnam, 1982, 1983). In order to create constructions of reality, people must share their constructions with others. This process of communication was studied by interpretivists using (among others) a *naturalistic* research tradition, which was carried out by studying organizations as cultures.

The Interpretive Perspective and Organizational Culture

Adopting the interpretive perspective allows us to study organizations as cultures. In fact, definitions of organizational culture are similar (if not identical) to definitions of the interpretive perspective. Organizational culture is seen as a process of creating and maintaining meaning or sense-making (Carbaugh, 1985) and also as a way in which members of an organization make sense of their coordinated and interlocked interaction. This process is a communicative event, with the emphasis on how people use communication to make sense of the world around them.

To understand the communication activities in an organization’s culture and to highlight how individuals make sense out of their organizational experience, Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) identified seven indicators of organizational sense-making. Each is identified next. As you read these indicators, answer the following questions:

1. Which of these indicators exist in organizations in which you are a member?
2. What examples can you provide from your own organizational experiences?

RELEVANT CONSTRUCTS

Relevant constructs are ways in which organizational members structure their experiences. These experiences can be constructed around objects, events, or processes. For example, relevant constructs for a member of a sorority might be the sorority “house” or the weekly “chapter” meeting; for a police officer, relevant constructs might be the “station,” daily “report,” or monthly target practice. In each of these cases objects, events, or processes are used by all organizational members as a means of constructing, and ultimately making sense of, organizational life.

FACTS

A second way for organizational members to make sense out of their experience is by relying upon facts. Each culture has a system of facts that members use to explain how and why the organization operates the way it does (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). A sorority charter, as well as sorority rules, regulations, and founding philosophy, all serve as important facts that members can rely upon to interpret organizational life. Police officers may operate under a city or county charter that provides an explanation for the need to “protect and serve,” under an established mission statement and list of goals, and under a long list of rules for appropriate police behavior (e.g. officers must be in full uniform when making an arrest). Facts comprise what can be termed the “social knowledge” of the organization. The social knowledge of a particular organizational culture usually informs its relevant constructs (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982, p. 124).

PRACTICES

Practices are a third way for members to make sense out of their organizational experience. Organizational practices may be formal or informal and are ways to simply “get the job done” (Pacanowsky & O’Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). Formal practices are generally expressed by one’s supervisor and involve one’s job task and job expectation (e.g. driving around the city “on patrol,” making arrests for unlawful behavior, etc.). Practices are also informal and may include behaviors that are *not* formally specified. For example, police officers quickly learn to “always sit in a public place with [their] backs to the wall” and “to drink only beverages (e.g., coffee) given to [them] by trusted individuals.” Often these informal practices are not disclosed formally. Rather, as we will discuss in Chapter 8, they are learned as one becomes socialized into the organization.

VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is a fourth feature of any organizational culture. It is comprised of words that are endemic to the culture (such as jargon or argot) and not readily available to

outsiders. The vocabulary used often provides clues to the organization's relevant constructs, facts, and practices. For example, in a study of sorority socialization, Bach (1990b) found that the words "moving up" had a very significant and important meaning to members of the sorority. These words were crucial to the "veteran" members of the sorority in their quest for the addition and socialization of new members as well as to their goal to be perceived as a viable organization in the Greek system. As we will note in Chapters 7 and 8, observing who uses jargon and to whom the jargon is used may reveal important power relationships in the organization.

METAPHORS

The use of a metaphor is an essential tool in helping organizational members structure their experiences. For example, we heard an embattled bank vice president used several metaphors at a meeting when she was informed that her branch would be "downsized." During the meeting she asserted that she would "rally the troops," "fight for what is right," and "never wave the white flag and admit defeat." It was apparent from her use of metaphor that she was placed in an adversarial position and felt that people in her branch were being treated unfairly. Statements such as these provide insight into how sense-making occurs.

STORIES

A sixth way in which organizational members engage in sense-making is through the use of stories. As Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo point out, "each organizational culture also contains stories which members exchange on a regular basis" (1982, P. 125). Stories allow members to share their organizational experiences with other members and serve (in some cases) to reveal how the experience could be duplicated by another member. Stories can be about personal successes ("Remember when our division won the company bowling tournament and aced out management?"), "screw-ups" (e.g. "Remember that time when DeBos didn't have his mace canister snapped tightly, sat on it, and maced himself and his patrol car?"), or take on folkloric quality (e.g., "Remember how Janet Ryzanca, the company president, started out as secretary and worked her way up the corporate ladder?"). In each case, stories are a very powerful way to communicate traditions of organizational life and to reinforce organizational knowledge.

rites and rituals

Finally, many organizational cultures engage in various rites and rituals that help in individual sense-making. Participation in rites and rituals provides organizational members with a shared sense of reality. Rites and rituals can range from the formal

annual performance reviews and company picnics to the informal rites and rituals associated with the socialization of new members, such as sorority pledging and initiation. An important rite and ritual in a police department with which we are familiar involved the “arresting” and incarceration of officers about to be married until their significant others arrived at the station with pizza. Only after the pizza was delivered were the incarcerated officers released. Engaging in this ritual was a way of showing support for officers as they were crossing the threshold to married life. Moreover, it served as a “test” of the future spouses’ sense of humor for police antics.

As organizational members engage in rites and rituals, practices, relevant constructs, and so forth, they are making sense out of their organizational culture. In using the interpretive perspective to study organizational cultures we begin to get a sense of what is important to the individuals in that culture and to see how they construct their social reality.

REFERENCES

- Albrecht, Terrance & Betsy W. Bach. *Communication in Complex Organizations*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997.
- Pacanowsky, Michael E. & Nick O'Donnell-Trujillo. *Communication and organizational cultures*. *Western Journal of Communication* 46(2):115-30, 1982.