

THE POLITICAL FUNCTION OF NARRATIVE IN ORGANIZATIONS

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This article extends recent developments in critical-interpretive approaches to organizations by examining the relationship between power, ideology, and organizational narrative. It is argued that the production of organizational reality can be explained in terms of its structuration through ideological meaning formations; such meaning formations simultaneously produce and are created by the structure of power interests in organizations. Organizational narrative is examined as one of the principal symbolic forms through which organizational ideology and power structures are both expressed and constituted.

UNDER the rubric of interpretive theory, a great deal of current research in organizational communication has focused on the sense-making practices of organization members, as manifested in their use of organizational symbolism. Such research is motivated by the belief that organization members, as social actors, actively participate in the construction of organizational reality through organizational discourse (Frost et al., 1985; Pondy et al., 1983; Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1983; Smircich, 1983). This "organizational culture" approach recognizes the emergent, ongoing, and sometimes precarious nature of organizational reality, and thus represents a significant shift away from the static, more functionalist approaches of traditional organizational theory.

My purpose in this paper is to extend these recent developments by demonstrating that cultural theory, despite its significant contributions to organizational research, articulates a rather limited and theoretically naive view of the relationship between organizational symbolism and organizational reality. While such research adequately describes organizational sense-making at a surface level, it does little to explicate the *deep structure* process through which certain organizational realities come to hold sway over competing world-views.

This article redresses this imbalance by focusing on narrative (as one form of organizational symbolism) and addressing its role as a legitimating device in formal organizations. Narratives provide members with accounts of the process of organizing. Such accounts potentially legitimate dominant forms of organizational reality, and lead to discursive closure in the sense of restricting the interpretations and meanings that can be attached to organizational activity. Closure frames discourse in a distortive fashion, and often misrepresents the interests of particular groups within organizations (Deetz & Mumby, 1985).

The notion of narrative closure within organizations is unpacked by laying out the complex and interdependent relationship that exists between narrative, power, and ideology in organizations. From this perspective, narratives not only evolve as a product of certain power structures, but also function ideologically to produce, maintain, and reproduce those power structures. Because of their embeddedness in

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the everyday practices of organizations, narratives are not easily perceived as legitimating devices—they often articulate an organizational reality that is accepted as “the natural order of things.” By adopting a political reading of narrative, however, it is possible to demonstrate that story-telling is not a simple representing of a pre-existing reality, but is rather a politically motivated production of a certain way of perceiving the world which privileges certain interests over others.

The fundamental premise for this article is based on Jameson’s edict that argues for

... the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective not as some supplementary method, not as an optional auxiliary to other interpretive methods current today—the psychoanalytic or the myth-critical, the stylistic, the ethical, the structural—but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation. (1981, p. 17)

Such a position confronts narrative politically, as an ideological force that articulates a system of meaning which privileges certain interests over others. A political reading of narrative draws attention to the relationship between narrative structure and the process of interpretation and, as such, focuses on the process by which dominant meaning systems arise. Narratives “address” readers/listeners by creating a “fit” between the narrative and the individual’s world-as-experienced. Such a fit is by no means perfect, however; otherwise, the individual would be completely subjugated to the narrative’s ideologically constructed “reality.” As Nakagawa (1983, p. 16) points out, this margin of difference between narrative and reader/listener translates into a tension between what is highlighted (present) and what is hidden (absent). It is this difference that a political reading of narrative exploits, seeking to create a disjuncture between the privileged (dominant, ideological) reading and that constructed by the reader/listener.

In a very real sense it is this disjuncture that this paper exploits, for it is clear that the issue of legitimation is a double-edged sword. Although it is argued that narratives in organizations can function as an ideological device to legitimate the meaning systems of dominant groups, narratives can also potentially *delegitimize* dominant meaning systems. In this context, power becomes more than a phenomenon that is imposed on subordinate groups; it involves a “dialectic of control” (Giddens, 1979, p. 72) in which even the ostensibly powerless can utilize organizational structure to their advantage. This dialectic will become clearer in the analysis of narrative in the final section of the paper.

The balance of this paper will therefore address the following issues: power and its relationship to organizing; ideology and organizational structuring; and the relationship between narrative and the social construction of organizational reality.

POWER IN ORGANIZATIONS

The issue of power maintains a somewhat tenuous status in organizational research. On the one hand, organizations themselves have a vested interest in presenting an image which emphasizes efficiency, productivity, and a concern for the well-being of personnel. Power does not fit very comfortably into this image. In addition, managerial lore relies heavily on the “myth of rationality” (Conrad, 1985; Weick, 1979), i.e., the belief that organizations operate on the basis of decisions made through the objective assessment of available information and the setting of appropriate, carefully selected goals. To suggest—at least publicly—that decisions in

organizations are made on any other bases (power and political expediency, for example) is heretical to many organization managers.

On the other hand, organizational researchers have clearly established "power" as an important phenomenon in organizations, although it is hard to find a consistent articulation of its nature (Pfeffer, 1981). Much of the early research on organizational power is strongly influenced by Weber's (1947) seminal work. In particular, his distinction between power (*Macht*) and authority (*Herrschaft*) has been largely co-opted by more traditional theorists in a way that legitimates organizational hierarchy and domination. Dahrendorf (1959, p. 166) clearly articulates this distinction: "The important difference between power and authority consists in the fact that whereas power is essentially tied to the personality of individuals, authority is always associated with social positions or roles." Within organizations, the exercising of authority is viewed as the rational extension of a social actor's legitimate role, i.e., as legitimate power.

More recently, however, traditional conceptions of organizational power have been challenged in order to debunk the management bias that has characterized much organizational research. In particular Clegg's (1975; 1981; Clegg & Dunkerley, 1980) work has shown how Weber's concept of power and bureaucracy can be utilized to provide a more radical interpretation of organizational power. Clegg (1975, p. 59) reinterprets *Herrschaft* as "rule" to demonstrate "the interpretative work that people engage in, when they make sense of the world." All authority, he suggests, is dependent upon this conception of rule-governed behavior because rules orient people toward structuring their behavior in a certain way. Different rule systems therefore provide different structures for orienting behavior. Domination involves getting people to organize their behavior around a particular rule system.

In this context, "power is about the outcomes of issues enabled by the rule of a substantive rationality which is temporally and institutionally located" (1975, p. 77). Power, then, is achieved by establishing an organization's mode of rationality through controlling the deep structure rules of organizations. It is not simply a possession of individuals within organizations. By adopting this conceptual framework, Clegg is able to show how structures of domination can become "naturally" and "rationally" integrated into organizations. Power, in this sense, is legitimate only because a particular "mode of rationality" deems it to be so; the group that maintains this mode of rationality (the organizational rule system) therefore controls the organization's system of power.

Several authors have sought to question the legitimacy of organizational models based on the notion that organizations are intrinsically rational in their modus operandi. These authors often characterize organizations as complex, ambiguity-ridden structures whose members engage in a constant struggle to reduce the equivocal nature of the communication environment that they inhabit. Most notably, Cohen, March and Olsen's (1972; March & Olsen, 1976) "garbage can" model of organizing has done much to undermine traditional perspectives based on rational decision-making.

An organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work. (1972, p. 2)

Building on this theme, Weick (1979) points out that organizational activity is often made sense of, i.e., made to *seem* rational, only in retrospect; there is frequently

only a limited and incomplete antecedently existing rationale which frames and directs organizational behavior. Thus "organizations are often reluctant to admit that a good deal of their activity consists of reconstructing plausible histories after-the-fact to explain where they are now, even though no such history got them to precisely this place" (Weick, 1979, p. 5).

If we tie together the notions of power and ambiguity, then, we can say that power is exercised when ambiguous or equivocal information is interpreted in a way that favors the interests of a particular organizational group; or, alternatively, when organizational ambiguity is utilized and amplified to disguise the exercise of power. Such a conception means that power can be exercised both intentionally and unintentionally, but most importantly by virtue of its integration into organizational structure. Power is therefore conceived not as a possession of individuals, nor as a relation among individuals (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Dahl, 1957, 1961), but rather as both a medium and product of organizational structuring and thus—following Clegg—as a potential means of control.

Such a conception of power is implicit in Lukes' statement that power is sustained by "the *socially structured* and culturally patterned behavior of groups, and practices of institutions" (1974, p. 22, emphasis added). Lukes focuses on the issue of interests, suggesting that power is often exercised not in an overtly behavioral manner, but rather by shaping the interests of individuals. Thus the existence of consensually derived values and beliefs in an organization, for example, does not necessarily mean that power is absent.

Lukes' conception of power is radical because he recognizes that power does not operate merely in the relation between individuals; rather, it is also a structural aspect of institutions which mediates in the socialization of actors in organizational settings. The behavioral aspect of the exercise of power can only function within this deeper, more fundamental structuring. It is fundamentally misleading, however, to separate organizational structure and interaction. Social relations do not simply exist *within* organizational structure, but are actually inseparable from (and constitutive of) that structure. From this perspective, the exercise of power is interdependent with the structure within which it occurs.

In an important article, Ranson, Hinings and Greenwood (1980) provide an excellent analysis of the way in which organizational structuration (Giddens, 1976, 1979, 1981) is an integral part of the dispersion of power in organizations. From this perspective, "structure [is] a complex medium of control which is continually produced and recreated in interaction and yet shapes that interaction: structures are constituted and constituting" (1980, p. 3). This quality of organizing is crucial to the vested interests of different groups within organizations. If we view organizations as being made up of different and competing values and belief systems that embody the interests of different groups, then the groups with the most power will be those that are best able to integrate their sectional claims into the very structuring of the organization.

Thus a group's interests will be best served if those interests become a part of the taken-for-granted meaning formations that structure organizational life. Once these interests become part of the organizational structure, then that structure reflexively mediates in, and reproduces, those interests. Organizational structure is therefore both the *medium* and the *outcome* of members' social practices (Giddens, 1979, 1981; Poole & McPhee, 1983; Riley, 1983), and is therefore an integral part of

organizational power. Thus "the structural framework is not an abstract chart but one of the crucial instruments by which groups perpetuate their power and control in organizations: groups struggle to constitute structures in order that they may become constituting" (Ranson et al., 1980, p. 8). At the same time it is important that power should not be conceived as a monolithic entity which is *imposed* on organization members; rather, a dialectical relationship exists between the two. In other words, social actors are constrained by organizational power structures, but at the same time these constraints provide the medium through which social actors can act strategically in organizations (Conrad, 1985).

This relationship between agency (the social actor as *actor*) and power becomes clear in Giddens' aforementioned theory of structuration, embodied in his concept of the duality of structure: "the structural properties of social systems are both the medium and outcome of the practices that constitute those systems" (1979, p. 69). In this context power becomes double-edged in the sense that it serves not only as a means *for* domination, but also as the vehicle through which social actors can potentially liberate themselves from domination. Giddens (1981, p. 51) articulates the duality of power thus: "at the heart of both domination and power lies the *transformative capacity* of human action, the origin of all that is liberating and productive in social life as well as all that is repressive and destructive." Simply to be a human agent means to have power. Even those in the most subordinate positions can "carve out 'spaces of control' in respect of their day-to-day lives and in respect of the activities of the most powerful" (1982, pp. 197-98). This "dialectic of control" recognizes that a reciprocal relationship exists between agency and power, and that power relations are chronically reproduced in the structures of social systems.

The question that remains, however, involves the means by which groups are able to secure their vested interests within the organizational structure. It seems apparent that structuring is a privilege of only *some* organizational members: not everyone can have equal access to the resources necessary to produce and reproduce certain relations of power. Indeed, the control of such resources is part and parcel of these power relations. In the next section this question is addressed by developing the concept of ideology as the vehicle through which an organization's "mode of rationality" becomes structured.

IDEOLOGY AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURING

While there is considerable variation in the treatment of the concept of ideology, the issue of the production and domination of consciousness, or subjectivity, is a central element in most contemporary theories. Neo-Marxist theorists are concerned with explicating the ways in which ideology functions to construct consciousness in such a way as to articulate and legitimate certain forms of social reality. In many theories, ideology is conceived as an intrinsic part of the process by which social actors are integrated into extant power structures (Althusser, 1970, 1971; Coward & Ellis, 1977; Giddens, 1979; Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1985; Larrain, 1979, 1983).

Therborn (1980), for example, suggests that ideology performs the double function of subjection and qualification. That is, ideology simultaneously subjects social actors to a particular social order, *and* qualifies them for the roles that the reproduction of this social order demands. In this sense, "ideology operates as discourse, addressing . . . human beings as subjects" (1980, p. 15). This process of

addressing, or interpellation, is accomplished through the tripartite articulation of social reality: Human actors are made to recognize (1) what exists, i.e., what is "real"; (2) what is good, i.e., what is "normal," "beautiful," etc.; and (3) what is possible, i.e., our sense of what is changeable (Therborn, 1980, p. 18). Ideology addresses and qualifies subjects by giving them an overall sense of the limits and possibilities of the social world—ideology provides a sense of what it *means* to be a social actor.

The notion of ideology addressing social-actors-as-subjects is central to this paper in that it provides a direct link between narrative and ideology. In this context, narrative can be conceived as more than simply a vehicle for diffusing information in an organization; it becomes a material social practice by means of which ideological meaning formations are produced, maintained, and reproduced. Thus in examining the structure of narrative from an ideological perspective, the principal concern is one of assessing "how structures of signification are mobilized to legitimate the sectional interests of hegemonic groups" (Giddens, 1979, p. 191). That is, narrative in its capacity as a signifying system can function to articulate a form of social reality that is accepted by all organizational groups, regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy.

Narrative—as one mode of symbolic structuring—is a material instantiation of ideology. It is an everyday organizational practice that structures "lived experience" in a particular way for organization members. Narrative functions ideologically to structure the very notion of "organizational practice" for social actors, privileging certain practices over others.

The relationship between narrative and the ideological structuring of meaning systems can be explicated in terms of the functions of ideology. These functions are outlined below, and in the final section of this paper organizational narrative is analyzed according to these functions.

According to Giddens (1979, pp. 193–96) there are three principal ideological functions: (1) the representation of sectional interests as universal; (2) the denial or transmutation of contradictions; (3) the naturalization of the present through reification. The first is a key function in the sense that an interest must be seen as more than sectional, i.e., specific to a particular group, if it is to be accepted as anything more than one interest among many competing interests. In organizational cultures, for example, the dominant group is that which can structure meaning formations for the organizational totality from their own paradigmatic framework (Brown, 1978).

The second function of ideology refers to the way in which fundamental system contradictions are reformulated more superficially as simple social conflict. The primary contradiction in capitalist society, that between private appropriation and socialized production, is legitimated by the ideological bifurcation of the political and economic spheres. Political strategies are thus not seen as acceptable in the workplace, while the legitimate political sphere is conceived in terms of the relationship between the individual and the state, embodied in the power to vote (Mason, 1982; Pateman, 1970). This strict separation of the political and economic spheres allows the technical interest to predominate in the workplace (Habermas, 1971). As such, organization managers can argue that power does not play a significant role in the structuring of organizations because decisions are made "rationally." The fact that one group is seen as more influential than another is

explicable in terms of their importance for the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the organization.

The third ideological function, reification (Lukács, 1971), deals with the degree to which humanly constructed social relations and meaning formations come to be perceived as "objective" and independent from those who created them. In this way what is "real" becomes fixed and immutable, i.e., "the way things are." In organizational cultures the reification of day-to-day experience limits the possibility of conceiving of alternative social realities or, if the alternatives are articulated, they might be considered strange or lacking in sense. For example, the issue of decision-making is normally understood to be contingent on organizational hierarchy (the more important a decision the higher the level at which it will be made). The concept of hierarchy, however, is an inherently political construct which gives power to a small percentage of organization members. Organizational culture can reify hierarchy, making it appear as a tangible, physically existing structure characterized by the formal organization plan, office size, number of secretaries, thickness of carpet, and so on.

Finally, in addition to Giddens' three functions of ideology, a fourth can be added, namely, the function of ideology as a means of control. This seems implicit in the notion of the representation of sectional interests as universal, but it requires a little unpacking. The concept of ideology as control is best expressed through Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony. As Mouffe (1981) points out, hegemony is frequently misconceived as the ideological domination of one class or group by another. This position views ideological struggle as a confrontation between two already elaborated, closed world-views. More accurately, hegemony involves "the ability of one class to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own" (Mouffe, 1981, p. 183). In this sense, a "collective will" is produced through "intellectual and moral reform" (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 12, 60-61). Ideological hegemony therefore involves "effective *self identification* with the hegemonic forms" (Williams, 1977, p. 18). Thus ideology functions as control through active consent rather than through passive acceptance of pre-given social formations.

To summarize this section, it is argued that ideology is materially grounded in the organized practices of social actors. Ideology constitutes subjectivity (consciousness) through its ordering of these practices into a coherent lived-world for the individual. Ideology and power are inextricably tied together insofar as ideology articulates social reality in terms of the interests of the dominant social group(s). In the context of organizations, power is most successfully exercised by those who can structure their interests into the organizational framework itself. Ideology therefore acts to support these interests by continually reproducing the structure of social practices that best serves them. In this sense, power and ideology are not purely structural phenomena, separate from the interaction of social actors; they are both the medium and outcome of that interaction, embodied in the "systems of signification" of the organization.

In the final section of this paper the above theoretical framework is applied to a specific organizational narrative, examining it in terms of its ideological functioning. The analysis will throw light on the implicit connection between organizational discourse and organizational control. Narrative will be shown to function as one of the principal means by which an organization's mode of rationality is maintained and reproduced.

NARRATIVE AND THE PROCESS OF LEGITIMATION

The current interest in the symbolic aspects of organizing demonstrates the intrinsic connection between communication and organizational cultures. Research in this area demonstrates that organizational reality is fundamentally symbolic in nature (Daft & Wiginton, 1979; Frost et al., 1985; Martin et al., 1983; Pondy et al., 1983). Organization members inhabit a symbolic environment in which they create the rules, norms and values that frame the process of organizing.

While many studies have focused on the role that organizational symbolism plays in expressing communal values, articulating shared rule systems, and so forth, few have focused on the symbolic aspects of organizational power, or on the role of symbolism in the process of legitimation of organizational interests. In this section I want to build on the work of authors like Riley (1983), Conrad (1983), Frost (in press) and Rosen (1985), each of whom attempts to make explicit the connection between organizational symbolism and the creation and distribution of organizational power. The focus of the analysis is organizational narrative, both because stories are a pervasive form of organizational communication, and because the very structure of narrative is interesting in itself.

The story analyzed below is taken from Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin's (1983) study of organizational storytelling. As such, the analysis is by no means an exhaustive examination of the relationship between a specific set of narratives and power; rather, it is intended to function as an exemplar of the way in which the connection between the two concepts might be fruitfully explored.

Organizational Narrative: An Exemplar

Martin et al. (1983) explore the role that stories play in demonstrating the unique qualities of organizations. Organization members tell stories to other members or outsiders to show how their organization is different from any other. Such stories can illustrate both positive and negative qualities of organizations. Martin et al. discovered, however, that "an [organizational] culture's claim to uniqueness is expressed through cultural manifestations that are not in fact unique" (1983, p. 439). In other words, stories that lay claim to organizational uniqueness occur in virtually identical forms across many organizations. Martin et al. use script theory to show that such stories generally contain common themes that address concerns that are pervasive in most organizations. Such concerns/themes include "What do I do when a higher status person breaks a rule?"; "Is the big boss human?"; "Can the little person rise to the top?"; "How will the boss react to mistakes?"; and so forth.

Martin et al. suggest that these thematic stories become an integral part of the organizational culture because they help to resolve the dualities that arise from the conflict between individual values and goals, and organizational exigencies. A duality is defined as "an issue that cannot easily be resolved, because contradictory aspects of the issue are inevitably present and are simultaneously desirable and undesirable" (1983, p. 447). Thus, for example, a story about an employee chastising a higher status rule-breaker expresses the duality of equality versus inequality. Here, the contradiction between the basic societal value of equality and the inequality of organizational hierarchy is at least partially resolved by showing that such equality is possible within the organization.

The story analyzed below extends Martin et al.'s analysis by examining the ways in which narrative functions to reproduce the deep structure aspects of organiza-

tional power and rationality. Martin et al. (1983, pp. 439–40) document a story in which Thomas Watson, Jr., the chairman of the board of IBM, is challenged by a supervisor,

a twenty-two-year-old bride weighing ninety pounds whose husband had been sent overseas and who, in consequence, had been given a job until his return. . . . The young woman, Lucille Burger, was obliged to make certain that people entering security areas wore the correct clear identification.

Surrounded by his usual entourage of white-shirted men, Watson approached the doorway to an area where she was on guard, wearing an orange badge acceptable elsewhere in the plant, but not a green badge, which alone permitted entrance at her door. "I was trembling in my uniform, which was far too big," she recalled. "It hid my shakes, but not my voice. 'I'm sorry,' I said to him. I knew who he was alright. 'You cannot enter. Your admittance is not recognized.' That's what we were supposed to say."

The men accompanying Watson were stricken; the moment held unpredictable possibilities. "Don't you know who he is?" someone hissed. Watson raised his hand for silence, while one of the party strode off and returned with the appropriate badge.

Martin et al. suggest that the moral of this story for higher status organization members is "even Watson observes the rules, so you certainly should," while for lower status employees the moral is "uphold the rules no matter who is disobeying" (1983, p. 440). The implication is that while other corporate heads may flaunt regulations, Watson is unique in the example that he sets to all his employees.

While this interpretation provides insight into the story, it can be developed more significantly in terms of the way that the story functions to produce, maintain, and reproduce a particular meaning formation. The story can be more fruitfully analyzed from an explicitly political perspective, using the functions of ideology laid out in the previous section. While Martin et al.'s analysis of the story is largely descriptive—presenting it as a simple reflection of the organization's value system—the analysis below makes explicit the link between organizational symbolism on the one hand, and legitimization and ideological domination on the other.

The first function of ideology—the representation of sectional interests as universal—is clearly present in the story. Recall that this function enables social practices that further the interests of a particular group to be perceived as the interests of *all* groups. In the context of this story, the issue of sectional versus universal interests manifests itself in the question of adherence to rules. In terms of universal interests, the story tacitly suggests that the corporation's rules are laid down for the benefit of all employees. The fact that Watson is required to take orders from a low-status employee has the effect of temporarily suspending the corporate hierarchy, in which sectional interests are grounded. Rules, as such, appear to transcend sectional interests; all employees, of whatever rank, are required to follow the rules.

What the story obscures, however, is the fact that the formal system of rules is created by the corporate elite (of which Watson is the head) to protect their own interests. IBM is a profit-making organization, one goal of which is to maintain as large a share of its market as possible. Part of this involves employment of strict security to protect corporate secrets. Staying ahead of its competition in the area of technology ensures the competitiveness of IBM products. The corporate rules that the story deals with, then, are in place for the benefit of people like Watson, and not for people like Lucille Burger.

The issue of rule-breaking becomes clearer in looking at the role of the story in denying or transmuting contradictions. In a sense, the story as a whole is a contradiction. The moral it conveys demonstrates that no one at IBM is "above the

law." However, the mere fact that the story has become part of organization lore indicates that it is exceptional in some way. If Watson *was* subject to corporate rules in the same way as other employees, then this story would have little significance. The story is further contradictory in the sense that it depicts Watson simultaneously as an "ordinary human being" who can be spoken to by any employee, and as a larger-than-life figure about whom fables are told. Thus the story comments on itself: On one level it is a straightforward narrative that tells the listener/reader something about the way IBM operates; on a second, meta-level, the story operates reflexively, building a particular image of Watson by saying "this is a story about the (in)famous chairman of IBM." The contradiction between Watson the individual and Watson the powerful corporate executive is obscured by the story's focusing on his interaction with an employee, to whom he ultimately defers.

The material reality of Watson's corporate position is effectively obscured by placing the narrative in an interpersonal context, and yet it only has impact because of the huge divide that separates the protagonists on the corporate hierarchy. In this sense, the effectiveness of the story depends on a tension between disparate elements: the story tells us that position on the corporate ladder means little when it comes to following rules (rules are for the good of everyone), but at the same time the listener/reader must appreciate Watson as a highly charismatic figure who commands the respect of everyone.

The story perhaps best serves an ideological function through the process of reification. Simply by virtue of its narrative structure, the story form lends itself to an infinite number of recountings. As Martin and Powers (1983) point out, an organizational story is easier to recall than a set of statistics containing the same information. Stories, of course, occur in all cultural settings, and one of their aims is to present the listener with a "slice of life" that exemplifies and animates some aspect of the culture in which the story is set. Through the ongoing process of retelling, events in a story become taken-for-granted by members of the culture. Even in the case of apocryphal tales, the division between fiction and reality is blurred to the point where a narrative event becomes "real" if it is retold enough times.

Of course, the effectiveness of a story depends at least partially on the quality of its telling. In the case of the example used here, there is no way of knowing how this story might be related in the organizational context. No doubt the basic structure remains fairly constant, while the embellishments will differ with each recounting. However, there is enough detail in the example given to demonstrate the process of reification in operation. First, there is a sharp contrast in the way that the two principal characters are described in the story. In fact, little or nothing is said about Watson himself, except that he was "surrounded by his usual entourage of white-shirted men." The description of Burger, on the other hand, is detailed by comparison. She is "a twenty-two-year-old bride weighing ninety pounds whose husband has been sent overseas." We are told that she is wearing a uniform that is "far too big" for her, and that she is very nervous at the prospect of her confrontation with Watson.

This relatively detailed description of Burger serves to accentuate the status difference between her and Watson. In this context, the story draws heavily on traditional sex-role stereotypes. For example, Burger is not simply a woman, but a "bride," suggesting both the traditional role of homemaker, and a strong sense of naivete; she has suddenly found herself, through circumstances beyond her control, in a position to which she is ill-suited. This is confirmed and accentuated by the

ill-fitting uniform, which suggests an incongruence between her and the role she is required to perform. The term "bride" thus suggests an innocence and dependence which contrasts sharply with the cynicism of the "real" corporate world. Furthermore, her weight implies lack of physical stature which, in most Western cultures at least, is associated with lack of authority. Again, this serves to throw into sharp relief the status difference between the two protagonists.

The lack of detail provided for Watson serves to enhance his status as an almost mythical character. The term "entourage," used to describe the men accompanying him, is a word normally applied to those who attend royal figures. In addition, Watson at no time speaks during the course of the story. At one point someone even speaks for him ("Don't you know who he is?"). Even at a moment where he might have spoken, he simply raises his hand to gain the attention of those around him. All of these details, although not central to the ostensible theme of the story, serve to juxtapose Watson sharply with Burger. What the listener/reader gets is not a picture of an ordinary organization member, but a figure of heroic proportions. The story thus serves to reify Watson-as-hero by demonstrating his effect on the day-to-day life of the organization.

In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the story serves to reify ideologically the organizational rule system itself. Organizational rules are humanly constructed systems of norms which provide members with an organizational grammar through which action is framed and contextualized. Rules provide direction for organizational structuration, both enabling and constraining the behavior of organization members. In contrast, the IBM story negates the human element inherent in organizational rules by stripping them of their enabling/constraining grammatical function. Lucille Burger's single-minded adherence to the rules reflects not so much a heightened sense of corporate loyalty, but rather an enforcing of rules *because they exist*.

In a sense, the story demonstrates rules as having an importance all their own, independent of the function that they perform within the organization. Placed in this context, the rule system and the process of organizing are bifurcated, existing in an almost antithetical relationship. Such an antithesis is often experienced by people who work in large, bureaucratic institutions. Frequently the overwhelming feeling is that the bureaucratic structure quite happily perpetuates itself via an elaborate and impenetrable system of rules (exemplified by the ubiquitous triplicate forms), and continuously works against the accomplishment of the organization's ostensible goals. As a result of this reification process organizational activity "takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity,' an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people" (Lukács, 1971, p. 83).

Finally, the narrative performs the ideological function of control by providing an example of "intellectual and moral leadership" for organization members. As Gramsci (1971) has indicated, the process of hegemony works most effectively when the world-view articulated by the ruling elite is actively taken up and pursued by subordinate groups. In the case of the IBM story, we have a striking example of a situation in which organization rules are rigorously reinforced by subordinate members. The story has all the more impact insofar as those rules are enforced from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. In this context, the story conveys the legitimacy and appropriateness of IBM's organizational structure. It suggests that employees are prepared to go to extreme lengths to protect that structure, even to the

point of incurring the wrath of superiors. Commitment to the system is therefore identified and equated with its legitimacy.

The above analysis thus provides a reading of the ideological function of the IBM story, demonstrating ways in which it is possible for narrative, as a social practice, to reproduce the dominant meaning formations of a particular social structure. Does this mean, therefore, that *all* narratives produced in this context will be subject to and reproduce the dominant ideology? Hall appears to answer this question in the affirmative: "Every social practice is constituted within the interplay of meaning and representation and can itself be represented. In other words, there is no social practice outside of ideology." However, "it does not follow that because all practices are *in* ideology, or inscribed by ideology, all practices are *nothing but* ideology" (1985, p. 103).

If ideologies are conceived as "systems of representation" (Althusser, 1971; Hall, 1985), that is, as systems of meaning by which we are able to identify our relationships to the world and others, then ideology becomes an essentially discursive phenomenon. However, there is no *necessary* correspondence between discourse and ideology. All discourse does not simply reproduce the dominant ideological meaning system in which it is located. As indicated earlier all discourse, as ideology, is potentially transformative in the sense that it can create a disjuncture between its interpretation and the world-as-experienced. All discourse, while often functioning as a "strategy of containment" (Jameson, 1981, p. 53 et passim), i.e., as a constraint on thought and action, can also function simultaneously as a means of enablement, as a vehicle through which social actors can radically transform the way they conceive of a particular social structure.

Placed in this context, concern about ideological versus nonideological discursive practices is misplaced. As Hall states above, all discourse may take place within ideology, but this does not make discourse identical *with* ideology. The key issue is not, therefore, what a nonideological narrative might be like, but rather how a particular narrative, or cluster of narratives, might function to enable or constrain behavior within the context of certain ideological meaning formations. The degree to which a story demonstrates a transformative or emancipatory capacity suggests its relationship to dominant ideologies. Thus the analysis of the IBM story is potentially transformative in the sense that it calls into question the "received" interpretation of the story; in other words, a disjuncture is created between the organization-as-experienced and the reading of the ideological themes in the story. This alternative interpretation provides "discursive penetration" into the meaning formations that constitute the social practices of IBM, allowing the possibility for new ways of understanding those practices.

A final point relates to the choice of story. It is obvious that the analysis of a single narrative in no way constitutes an in-depth examination of the ideological meaning formations in operation at IBM. The purpose here was simply to use this story to demonstrate how such an analysis might be accomplished. Indeed, to even talk about *a* story representing *an* ideology does little justice to the complexity of social structures in general. Hall (1985, p. 104) presents the complex relationship between ideology and discourse thus:

Ideologies do not operate through single ideas; they operate, in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations. As you enter an ideological field and pick out any one nodal representation or idea, you immediately trigger off a whole chain of connotative associations. Ideological

representations connote—summon—one another. So a variety of ideological systems or logics are available in any social formation. The notion of *the* dominant ideology and *the* subordinated ideology is an inadequate way of representing the complex interplay of different ideological discourses and formations in any developed society.

Further research into organizational narrative must carefully explore the “clusters” of narrative that constitute the complex and interdependent meaning systems of organizational structuration. There is no simple correspondence between power, ideology, and narrative. It is too simplistic, for example, to assume that a particular narrative cluster asserts a consistent, monolithic organizational reality; such an analysis must regard the cluster in the context of other clusters, relevant organizational practices, conflicting sub-cultures, economic conditions, and so forth. The power structure in an organization is by no means unitary, and its ongoing structuring is dependent on this complex system of discursive formations that continually creates and recreates the interdependent and interlocked ideological meaning formations in an organization.

CONCLUSION

The everyday use of narrative in organizations is one of the means by which the power structure of an organization is produced and reproduced. In the context of this article, power has been conceived in terms of the underlying, deep structure rule system (the “mode of rationality”) which frames organizational behavior and determines appropriate and inappropriate social practices. The ideology of an organization refers to the ways in which members, as social subjects, become qualified to participate in and create the organizational reality (mode of rationality) that is represented to them. This process of representation occurs through the discursive practices of the organization.

Pateman (1980, p. 16) states that “every act reproduces or subverts a social institution. . . . If every social institution is an organization of power . . . then every act is political for it either sustains or subverts a given organization of power.” Organizational narrative can therefore be viewed as political in that it can potentially both sustain and subvert the underlying logic of an organization’s power structure. Narratives can reaffirm or call into question the rationality of organizational practices.

Organizational narratives thus exist as an instantiation of the deep structure power relations in an organization to the extent that they help to determine the way that organizational practices are interpreted. The narrative form is a particularly powerful means of accomplishing this in the sense that it provides organization members with an easily identifiable exemplar of organizational “reality.” Contrary to most research on organizational symbolism, narratives do not simply *inform* organization members about the values, practices, and traditions to which their organization is committed. Rather, they help to *constitute* the organizational consciousness of social actors by articulating and embodying a particular reality, and subordinating or devaluing other modes of “organization rationality.”

The analysis of the IBM story negates the pervasive tendency to treat all narrative forms as non-political unless they take up an overtly political topic. On the contrary, stories are narrative devices which do not exist independently of the ideological meaning formations and power relations within which they are structured. They are produced by and reproduce these relations, helping to position subjects within the

historical and institutional context of the material conditions of existence. A politically informed interpretation of institutional narrative must therefore explicitly take up this duality of structure, and uncover its "strategies of containment."

Narratives are not generated in a socio-economic vacuum but are an expression of the material conditions that a particular mode of production generates. The process of narrative helps to reproduce these material conditions by articulating an internally coherent sense of itself and the world that it describes. In other words, narratives punctuate and sequence events in such a way as to privilege a certain reading of the world. They impose an order on "reality" that belies the fact that such a reading is a largely ideological construction that privileges certain interests over others. Further research must therefore take up the possibilities that a political reading of narrative provides for the analysis of organizational cultures. I have merely provided some pointers in that direction. The theoretical framework laid out here constitutes a foundation upon which narratives gathered in actual organizational settings can be analyzed.

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