



## Organizational Orienteering: Charting the Terrain

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**Current  
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### Abstract

This introduction to the *ACJ* special issue on organizational communication provides an overview and definitional context for the work on organizational metaphor, reviews past and current popular conceptualizations of such metaphors, and addresses the role of emerging metaphors in charting new terrain for organizational life.

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A considerable amount of research has been devoted to how language shapes current realities and molds emerging ones (e.g., Burke [1969](#), [1984](#); Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#)). This work addresses the methods by which we create and sustain intersubjective reality through communication. As Wittgenstein ([1961](#)) suggested, the limits of our language determine the limits of our knowledge. A key means through which social reality is constructed and maintained is metaphor (Black, [1962](#); Burke, [1969](#); Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#)).

Metaphor acts as a compass, which serves to orient us. We use metaphor to plot our paths-where to head, where to avoid. As Kirby and Harter ([2003](#)) assert, metaphors are "linguistic steering devices that guide both thinking and actions" (p. 33). Although much of the influence of metaphor is subtle, we can become more aware of the powerful effects metaphors have on our thinking and behavior by focusing on and analyzing them.

In recent years, some attention in the organizational literature has been devoted to metaphors used to guide our understandings of organizations and work life. Before turning attention to new metaphors, the theme of this special issue, this article will provide an overview and definitional context for the work on organizational metaphor, review past and current popular conceptualizations of such metaphors, and address the role of emerging metaphors in charting new terrain for organizational life.

### Metaphor, Organizing, and Organizational Life

#### Metaphor

Metaphors pervade everyday conversation and, despite being subtle, have powerful effects on our thought and behavior (Kaplan, [1990](#), [1992](#); Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#); Shotter & Cunliffe, [2003](#); Smith & Eisenberg, [1987](#); Watson, [1995](#)). Typically, metaphor is defined as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, [1980](#), p. 5) or "a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this" (Burke, [1969](#), p. 503). It is through this subtle, yet powerful linguistic device-metaphor-that we understand our experiences, and through this understanding, that we reason (Lakoff & Johnson, [1987](#)).

Nevertheless, despite this process of influence, we are typically not aware of our perceptual system. And in

fact, much of the time we behave rather automatically (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). As Burnham (1984) notes, "For the fish swimming in the ocean, the comprehension of wetness is impossible. Wet requires the contrast of dry" (p. 7). It is through metaphors that we learn to behave automatically and that we begin to perceive such contrasts. However, "we rely so heavily on metaphor that we often overlook its powerful and practical role in our discourse" (McMillan & Cheney, 1996, p. 1). For example, noting that metaphors are powerful language devices, Varan (1998) asserted that "they provide new intellectual vistas focusing attention on distinct facets of the perplexities of life" (p. 58). Such vistas are the primary focus of this special issue, especially as they relate to orienting new organizational forms.

Schön (1993) explores metaphor as both a product and a process. As a product, it is a frame through which we see. As a process, it brings new frames or ways of seeing into existence. Metaphor analysis should go beyond the surface to deeper levels-examining products and processes-and their influences on our worldviews and values (Burrell, Buzzanell, & McMillan, 1992).

### **Metaphor Analysis**

The popularity of work on metaphor is evidenced by the significant amount of research across multiple disciplines and topical areas in the past few years. For example, recent work has addressed: past and new metaphors for research interviews (Alvesson, 2003), the research process (Dexter & LaMagdeleine, 2002), and researchers (Kagan, 1998); scientific knowledge (Valiverronen & Hellsten, 2002) and scientific inquiry (Flannery, 2001); abortion and cultural amnesia (Stormer, 2002); persuasive effects of metaphor (Sopory & Dillard, 2002); the community metaphor for online groups (Brown, 2002); economic metaphors and the World Wide Web (Kent, 2001); metaphor and image restoration (Anderson, 2002); metaphors and military action in Kosovo (Kuusisto, 2002); and family communication (Pawlowski, Thilborger, & Cieloha-Meekins, 2001).

Further, a large and growing body of work addresses metaphor and organizations or work life. In just the last two years, a considerable number of studies have investigated the role of metaphor in shaping organizational life and understanding. For example, attention has been given to: metaphor in entrepreneurship (Dodd, 2002), board-staff relations (Bradshaw, 2002), knowledge management (Contractor & Monge, 2002), organization theory (Marshak, 2003; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002, 2003), organizational change (Baez & Abolafia, 2002; Morgan, 2001; Shockley-Zalabak, 2002), optical metaphors in organizational studies (Mukherjee & Rahman, 2002), metaphors of transparency and caring corporations (Livesey & Kearins, 2002), the ledger metaphor and cyberloafing (Lim, 2002), talk in and about teams (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2002; Gribas & Downs, 2002; Hindmarsh & Pilnick, 2002), family metaphors and organizational crisis (Willihnganz, Hart, & Leichty, *in press*), the circle metaphor and organizational behavior (King, Down, & Bella, 2002), organizational mergers (Fitzgibbon & Seeger, 2002) and takeovers (Pelzer, 2002), the metaphor of terminal illness and CEO failure (Slocum, Ragan, & Casey, 2002), moving from the theatre metaphor to the cinema metaphor in contemporary organizations (Wood, 2002), and the "hands-on" metaphor in nursing (Engebretson, 2002).

According to Putnam and Fairhurst (2001), "metaphor contributes to organizational analysis in three primary ways: creating and developing organizational theory, describing and understanding the discursive texture of organizations, and conducting organizational research" (p. 107). Each of these ways is addressed here.

### **Past and Current Organizational Landscapes**

Clearly, understanding the role and functions of metaphor is important to understanding the social creation of reality, and this is no different when studying organizations. Understanding metaphor is vital to understanding organizational reality (Morgan, 1996, 1997). Particular metaphors have become widely accepted and some have been popularized in the academic and popular literature. Certainly, some are more popular with managers and more often cited by workers.

In [1996](#), Putnam, Phillips, and Chapman suggested that seven clusters of metaphors have had key influences on organizational research. These metaphors are: conduit, lens, linkage, performance, symbol, voice, and discourse. And in one of the most widely read texts on organizational metaphors, Morgan ([1986](#)) describes eight metaphors that shape how we see organizations and organizational life.

The first of these metaphors is organizations as machines, where workplaces are seen as composed of "interlocking parts that each play a clearly defined role in the functioning of the whole" (Morgan, 1986, p. 13). The second metaphor depicts organizations as organisms, which centers attention on the processes of evolution, life stage, and adaptation. From this framework, the relationship between an organization and its environment (e.g., how it copes with environmental changes) is also of interest. The third metaphor views organizations as brains. From this perspective, organizational learning and information processing are foregrounded. The fourth metaphor sees organizations as cultures. Here the focus is on socially created and accepted reality, acceptance of values and beliefs, and sense-making processes.

The fifth metaphor posits that organizations are political systems, where individuals and coalitions vie for recognition and resources. Interest is placed upon power, authority, and politics. The sixth metaphor suggests that organizations are psychic prisons, with individuals snared in traps of their own making (i.e., their own belief systems and ways of seeing the world). The seventh metaphor describes organizations as flux and transformation. From this vantage point, attention is given to the forces that create and perpetuate organizational change (e.g., preservation of the same organizational form, dialectical tensions). The final metaphor is that organizations are instruments of domination, systems designed to exploit workers and others in the environment in the process of reaching organizational goals (Morgan, 1986).

Of course, a number of other metaphors for understanding organizational life and functioning (e.g., organizations as families; see, for example, Willihnganz et al., in press) have been described in the organizational literature. The above review is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to point out that while metaphors guide our thought in particular directions, they also simultaneously obscure or block other directions. That is, they orient us in specific directions-and due to their subtle influences, we proceed in those directions, giving little attention to other possible paths. For example, Willihnganz et al. ([in press](#)) describe how an organizational crisis was enacted around tension in a root metaphor, organization as family, and how members' stories clung to this metaphor, even as broad organizational changes occurred. In many cases, organizations and their members gain from the stability of these metaphors, but in other cases, such metaphors constrain us. Thus, examination of new metaphors and extensions of existing metaphors can allow us to assess potentially productive new paths-new terrain-for both our own organizations and the study of organizations and organizational communication.

### **Charting New Terrain-Broadening Our Vision of the Organizational Landscape**

By employing metaphor differently, we can enhance our creativity and potentially move in positive new directions, which may allow for a better understanding the "many-sided character of organizational life" (Morgan, [1986](#), p. 17). Such action also allows for the potential to devise new ways to organize, new ways to understand organizing, and new ways to address and resolve organizational problems. "The challenge is to become skilled in the art of using metaphor to find fresh ways of seeing, understanding, and shaping the situations that we want to organize and manage" (Morgan, [1997](#), p. 6). In particular, the emergence and proliferation of new organizational forms and the fluidity of some of these forms (e.g., chains, clusters, strategic alliances) call for a refocusing of organizational inquiry (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, [1996](#)). Organizations are evolving and "metaphors are repertoires of meanings" (Putnam & Fairhurst, [2001](#), p. 107) that assist in sense-making processes, but simultaneously because they "function at the nexus of evolving symbols, text, and meaning" (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001, p. 107) they also shape and sometimes determine emerging reality.

### **A Look at New Metaphors**

In his examination of sensemaking in a wildland firefighting tragedy, [Greg Larson](#) examines how an

organization's overarching worldview functions as a guiding metaphor. This worldview shapes interpretive processes and steers decision making. His case study focuses on the 1994 Colorado South Canyon fire, which resulted in firefighter deaths and subsequent investigations. In particular, Larson assesses reliance on "activity" or "particle" orientations and how these orientations influence thought and behavior. Through Larson's case analysis, we come to better understand organizational decision-making processes, especially those in crisis situations, and we see the role of metaphor in shaping degree and type of organizational cooperation and coordination.

Larson's case study examines an actual fire to investigate underlying metaphors shaping firefighter behavior, but in [Chris Poulos's](#) article fire becomes a metaphor. In particular, Poulos focuses on fire and ice as metaphors of organizational praxis. He explicates the juxtaposition between organizational passion, using a fire metaphor, and organizational control, using an ice metaphor. By exploring the dialectical tensions between fire and ice, using critical phenomenology and narrative analysis, Poulos illustrates how life is played out at one organization.

Continuing Poulos's focus on dialectic, [David Boje, John Luhman, and Ann Cunliffe](#) take a dialectical view of theatre as both life and metaphor. Although noting contrasts in earlier conceptualizations of organizations as theatre (i.e., one, fueled by Goffman's work, that views organizations dramaturgically and suggests that organizing can be studied as official and unofficial performances and another, based on Burke's work, that asserts that drama is life and that organizing is literally both theatrical and dramatic), Boje et al. work to integrate these views into a critical postmodern perspective. Toward this goal, they examine the work of Debord, Bakhtin, and Boal and discuss inherent dialectics.

The recognition of forces of tension and change and those of stasis, another organizational dialectic, are foregrounded in [Dan DeGooyer's](#) use of poignant organizing as metaphor. He defines poignant organizing as "the process by which disparate elements or fragments come together in an elegant manner at the opportune time to create a fleeting or momentary whole (an episode) in the organization that changes the organization." Asserting that change is the centerpiece of modern organizations, DeGooyer draws on the work of Bakhtin, de Certeau, and Weick to illustrate complex and moving dimensions of organizational life.

Examining actual change versus reported change is at the heart of [Sheri Shuler's](#) analysis of popular media coverage of women executives and her case study of press coverage of Carly Fiorina, CEO of Hewlett-Packard. Rather than view organizations as "containers," Shuler situates organizations more broadly, exploring how cultural discourses, such as magazine coverage, reinforce, rather than breakdown, existing views (e.g., the glass ceiling). Although the coverage of women executives suggests that the glass ceiling occasionally has been punctured (and some successful women assert that it no longer exists), Shuler maintains that this ceiling is still in place and is not particularly permeable. In fact, her analysis suggests that much of the coverage reinforces common sex stereotypes, rather than dispelling them. Shuler suggests that the glass ceiling might better be thought of as a "transparent forcefield," which offers protection to its creators.

## **Conclusions and Future Directions**

These five articles offer new metaphors and extensions of previous ones to conceptualize organizational life. Worldview, fire and ice, theatre as both life and metaphor, poignant organizing, and transparent forcefield offer us direction as we continue to organize and to analyze organizing. The similarities in some of these offerings and the diversity across them position us well to chart new terrain, envision new landscapes, and continue our journey in understanding organization.

These metaphors can serve as our compasses-allowing us to select where we want to go and places to avoid. They can act as our segues-allowing us to formulate new ways to see and understand. They can serve as discussion points-encouraging us to better inform each other.

Rather than be anchored by past metaphors, we can use these new "linguistic steering devices" (Kirby & Harter, 2003, p. 33) as guides toward reaching further. As Marcel Proust suggested, "the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes." It is through new metaphors that

we achieve these new eyes.

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