

# METAPHORS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CREATIVITY: FROM SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

Juan Carlos Alicea Rivera, Universidad de Puerto Rico

## ABSTRACT

*We used metaphors to explain several processes in organizations over the years. The metaphorical analysis allows us to transfer concepts from one domain of knowledge to another, improving our understanding of organizations. As a psychological process, we analyzed creativity through the lenses of particular abilities of certain people. But, is it possible to personify organizations and consider them as creative entities? How powerful had been the use of metaphors to explain creativity as organizational process in the past? The purpose of this conceptual work, based on discourse or textual analysis, is to explain how two recent developed metaphors could be used as to increase our understanding of the creative process exhibited in organizations: from conceptual ideas of the symbolic interactionism, the creativity as a "role"; from theory of constructivism, the creativity as a "zone of potential development".*

**JEL:** D21, D23, M14, M54

**KEYWORDS:** Creativity, Organizational Culture, Organizational Climate

## INTRODUCTION

The use of metaphors characterizes our way of thinking, acting, and our search for meaning (Grant & Oswick, 1996). Metaphors are the result of a cognitive process by which a concept or word that we apply to a new context in a figurative sense and in a different but plausible way. In management research, metaphors serve as mechanisms to study organizations from different perspectives. Morgan (2006) state that metaphors help companies to analyze organizations from a "mosaic of different lenses or images". Bolman and Deal (2008), stresses that companies are ambiguous, contradictory and uncertain, thus metaphors help administrators to cut the confusion caused by managing such a complex phenomenon.

Managing creativity in organizations is subject to analysis from multiple perspectives. Creativity integrates mental processes belonging to different planes of reality: psychological, cultural, political, structural and others. Therefore, making an exclusive analysis of the creative process in organizations from only one of its many visions is too simple (Pabón, 2001).

Therefore, a metaphorical analysis could be a useful tool to analyze management of creativity in organizations. In fact, the purpose of this paper is to explore two recently used metaphors associated with theoretical construction of creativity in management's literature: from social psychology, the reference to creativity as a "role"; from cognitive psychology and constructivism, creativity as a "zone of potential development".

First, we will consider how important metaphors are in organization theory, including characteristics which are relevant to organizations' context. Second, based on textual analysis, a research technique under discourse or content analysis, we will look at classical texts related to interactionist and constructivist psychological views, to discover possible metaphors which will serve to understand the creative process. Finally, we will show why these positions represent, possibly, a relevant approach to the study creativity in organizations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since philosophers Plato and Aristotle established the concepts of mimesis and representation as the basis of poetry and literary fiction, metaphor has been a primary force through which humans create meaning. Metaphors allow us to link experiences in different areas, which help us to understand various concepts in different ways. Grant and Oswick (1996) stated that metaphors produce a new view of reality. The value of metaphors resides in how they help to acquire new knowledge and let to explain various aspects of a phenomenon (Tsoukas, 1991). What were the metaphors used over the years to explain the concept of creativity? Several years ago, creativity was an "attribute of some exceptional human beings" (Woodman and Schoendfelt, 2010). Brown (2010) cited three prolific researchers on creativity and their positions: Spearman said that be creative is to have general ability or talent, not a measurable characteristic: Guilford stated that creative talent is an individual phenomenon, not subject to analysis from social context; but Torrance developed tests to "measure" creative thinking, as the intelligence tests do.

To some researchers (Brown, 2010), we should analyze creativity from a biological standpoint, as a process of adjustment between the organism and the environment. For Romo (1997) and psychoanalysis creativity is "sublimation of conflict". For her, our instincts will be in opposite direction to the goals pursued and there will be an "unconscious fight" to meet high cultural values and behavior socially acceptable. This struggle will release the creative potential.

For behavioral researchers, a product or performance is creative only to the extent that it is novel and useful response to a problem or situation. For Skinner (1986) creativity is "programmed instruction", that is, if we internalize a repeated pattern of responses, we will reinforce our creativity. The cognitive school, moreover, established the computer metaphor as a tool to solve major problems, including those related to creative thinking (Gardner, 2010; Varela, 2000).

But metaphors considered above put human beings at the center, whether it alludes to biological or environmental factors, measurable or not measurable skills, something already programmed or stimulated. However, those metaphors do not address the serious implications of the social context and the possible interactions with "other" human beings, important issues related to free creative spirit in organizations, today.

Thus, what about metaphors in organizations? Over the years we have used metaphorical analysis to approach organizational culture, design and development studies (Morgan, 2006; Bolman & Deal, 2008). For example, two different metaphors stand out today as opposing views about the way companies organize and develop them: the mechanistic vision and the organic vision. The first view related to the metaphor of organizations as "machines", implying that the structural aspects of business and management are of greater importance. The second view focuses on the metaphor of the company as an "organism", which implies that the adaptation, stability, and survival, as well as aspects related to human resource management, is the main orientation in organizations (Morgan, 2006).

What implications over management in organizations have these views or metaphors? When managers view organizations as machines, they design them rationally, with fixed and predetermined goals to follow and specific descriptions of jobs to do. The principal assumption here is that businesses run within a stable and efficient environment. Human resources, under this view, should adjust to task requirements and organizations' processes (Bolman & Deal, 2008). In case of the organic view, metaphor serves to compare companies with "organisms", which implies that the processes of adaptation, stability and survival, as well as aspects related to human resource management, are the main motivations in organizations (Morgan, 2006). Therefore, under this approach, the tasks match to the needs and expectations of the people, while we should use a lateral communication.

The use of metaphors has allowed researchers to focus on organizational problems from several angles. In fact, if managers could understand the power of metaphors and integrate them as a basis to the study of organizations, their understanding of such entities will increase (Grant & Osrick, 1996).

However, we cannot liberally use metaphors as sole explanations of the organizational problems or processes, nor think that we have an indefinite number of possible approaches to the study of organizations through the use of metaphors (Mangham and Overington, 1987). For example, Tsoukas (1991) says that operational definitions of organizational concepts are not possible by means of metaphors. So why some authors use different metaphors to conceptualize several aspects associated with organizations in recent years? (Morgan, 2006; Bolman & Deal, 2008).

Pabón (2001) explained that, while the concept of creativity as so many definitions in management's literature, the typical notion of creativity in use by organizations is a technical one. In fact, the difference between innovation and creativity is not clear for managers in various organizations. However, he stated that to understand creativity in terms of its procedural and technical aspects only, this implies forgetting its ontological dimension. Creativity is an inherent human capacity and, therefore, implicitly present in all organizations as groups of human beings.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Creativity is a human ability exhibited in two ways, personally and socially. But companies are emphasizing the personal creative spirit only, not the interaction among all members of the organization (Ray & Myers, 1989). In other words, there is a tendency to think of creativity in organizations as a mere management tool for quality improvement in goods and services over time.

However, companies have gone to the other end, too. Companies have raised various questions about the problem of creativity and how the "creative spirit can manifest, learn or develop" (Ray & Myers, 1989). Do they mean the rare person that manifests it? If this is true, does it make sense to speak of organizational creativity? Is it possible to have "better explanation and direction" over creativity management in organizations through metaphorical analysis?

As we will see, it is only when the process of continuous interaction among all members of an organization, together with an adequate management of organizational context, that we can "build" an environment that promotes the creative spirit in business. The ability of members of an organization to take on different roles and to activate their potential development areas is significant, too. We will examine classical texts on social and cognitive psychology, through textual analysis technique, to do this.

Discourse and content analysis refers to processes of search of meaning of texts. Whenever we use one of their related techniques, textual analysis, the goal is, not to look at the text itself, but something implicit which shows his "sense" (Andreu Abela, 2010). To conduct such a textual analysis, we should follow some steps.

First, we should determine the object of analysis. In our research, the unit of analysis will be classical books in social and cognitive psychology, fundamental texts related to psychological processes present on human interaction. Secondly, we should determine the encoding rules and categorization of discourses present on those texts. In our case, we will apply an analysis to discover if we find some metaphors related to group dynamics in those books. Finally, we will make some inferences upon such categorization, that is, to prove if such discovered metaphors could serve as better explanation on organizational creativity.

## ANALYSIS

The crisis of the social psychology of the 1960's, produced an interest in interactionist and cognitive theories (Ibáñez, 1990). First, it highlighted the roles played by both people and researchers, under the experimental situation. Second, it drew attention to the importance it had the meaning attributed to the situation by people. Finally, it fostered the experiments validity, putting in doubt any investigation that wasn't strictly experimental.

Mead (1990) says that the category "individual" is only possible on the basis of their membership in society. However, we do not internalize an abstract society, but we reproduce in ourselves, a concrete society, historically determined. In other words, society is "not a thing out there" but emerges in interaction. Individuals are dynamic and constantly changing structures. Thus, we become people in as we understand the roles or specific terms that make us stand out as members of a group.

His proposal gave birth to symbolic interactionism, whose claim is to find the processes by which people interpret their social environment, give meaning to their actions and those of others, and form an accurate representation of the their immediate reality, so that they can develop appropriately within them. Man is not a passive observer of environmental stimuli, but an active agent.

One of its main theorists, Herbert Blumer (1986), tells us that it studies the construction of social meanings through human interactions. Blumer was a prolific researcher in sociology of representations implicit in human interaction, thus his work represents one of our classical texts to be examine in present research. According to him, social facts do not determine human behavior from the outside, but they are the result of human behavior that occurs continuously through their practical activity.

Blumer states that human beings are active agents capable of articulating roer ways to define, depending on the circumstances, the meanings of social situations where they interact. The symbolic interactionism emphasizes the dynamic interaction among people, that is, the way we act, perceive, interpret, and exchange with "other" humans and, in return, such "others" intertwined wit tem.

The symbols, in this context, are social objects used for representation and communication. They are representative of something more and we act on them in accordance to the meaning they promote; they're social in the sense that they mean something to more than one individual. They are critical because they shape our reality and allow our complex individual and group life. Symbols allow us to develop and keep up shared meanings. Social life depends on symbols and they produce mutual understanding and knowledge accumulation.

Furthermore, Blumer says, "roles" are different cognitive structures that allow us to adjust to different social situations. Every role is a holistic idea around which people act, but they don't set up how they work specifically. They shape the identity as a set of perspectives that the person assumes in the process of explaining the meaning of what is happening around them.

The world consists of objects toward which we act in a meaningful way. We interpret the objects, especially the abstract, and this interpretation influences and directs our behavior. What immediate application can we make within the organizational context, particularly as related to creativity?

Csikszentmihalyi (1998), for example, states that it is easier to enhance creativity by changing environmental circumstances than trying to make people think in a more creative way, since creative achievement is not the result of a sudden intuition. Therefore, creativity does not happen in the head of people, neither isolating individuals and their work history and social environment, but in the interaction between a person's thoughts and a sociocultural context.

The symbolic interaction helps us understand the organizational reality. For example, when an employee gets new responsibilities and asked to monitor certain processes that he had not supervised before, he is in a new role, which will challenge his creative abilities. On the one hand, he will feel the responsibility to control the consequences of his actions and, on the other, he feel that he feels the need to work freely and creatively.

However, what will help him to fulfill his new role? Before that change of roles, the employee was an appendage by management in decision-making, but once e as a new responsibility, he internalized a new role and is in control of his own situation and produced a sense of commitment that he did not have before. From social constructivism, the world is socially constructed, so it subscribes to an alternate view of reality, one that is the product of social interaction between human beings. According to this notion, communication serves as a mean to "connect minds" and show the state of knowledge at specific time. (Ibáñez, 1990).

Presumably, after new interactions between human beings are more stable, the individuals involved in them accept new rules to act within the system. This perspective focuses, then, not on the individual but on recurring patterns in interactions within a work situation. From a constructionist's standpoint, there is no such thing as a fixed or objective reality (Weick, 1995). When we say that knowledge is socially constructed, what we attempt to show is that perceptions about what is reality differ among people because of their specific social contexts.

Maturana and Varela (1990), say that "all cognitive experience involves humans, as subjects of knowledge, personally and biologically...in a solitude that only transcends the world that is created with it." Therefore, we are aware that we are in a world that the more we examine it, the more we find that we cannot separate our story from how this world is going to appear. "Doing is to know and all knowing is doing", says Maturana and Varela, so that is why we cannot take out of context human beings in the process of knowing, "since that everything that is said is said by someone."

Due to the importance of the historical context and cultural construction in social interaction to understand higher psychological processes, such task occupied the life and research of Lev Vygotsky. His research demonstrated the priority of human interaction over cognitive processes, thus his work represented a classical text selected for this purpose. For Vygotsky (2012) human psychological reality (or intra-level 'psychological reality) is a result of the internalization of the forms of social relationship.

Vygotsky continues: "any role in the cultural development ... first appears on the social level and then at a psychological level. It first appears between people as an interpsychological category and then ... as an intrapsychological category". He posits a dialectical relationship: the human beings have historic and cultural determined dimensions and they can transform their immediate reality through them. In other words, although human psychological reality has a social origin, the human being internalized the ability to act creatively and transforming his or her context.

Symbols are cultural products which we take ownership through education, first informally and then formally, and are considered in any explanation of the learning process, which includes organizations. According to Moll (1995), a central role of education and training in organizations is to create adequate social contexts where the conscious use of cultural tools, such as language, serves to the purpose of people formation.

Vygotsky states that the current level of execution in the task represents the cognitive development retrospectively, while the potential level of execution represents cognitive development prospectively So, if an employee interacts continually with a more capable or creative peer, he/she can develop this potential. For this reason, he called them, zones of proximal development.

As stated Rodríguez Arocho (1995), "... human beings transform their natural and social world through the use of tools and, in the process, transform themselves". Conceptualizes a socially constructed mind implies that mental activity is not the result of internal physiological reactions or responses to external stimuli. Any human production, and creativity is one of them, should refer always to situational aspects.

How can we apply these theories to the study of creativity in organizations? We have new creative metaphors as are the "roles", "construction of reality" and "development potential." Can they serve as bases for the development and organizational conceptualization of the creative process? Is it possible to speak about organizational creativity?

## **RESULTS- IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL CREATIVITY**

Pabón (2001) defines creativity as "the connection of different levels of experience over previously unconnected frames of reference". Interestingly, he assigned to creativity notion, something related to one of primary functions of metaphor: conceptual associations between different experiences. He says that, "creativity is an attribute of the person and there is no such thing as a creative organization, in the same way that there is no collective mind." But he recognizes that can we can develop organizations into a community of people who promote an organizational culture that has creative production as a center.

Woodman & Schoendfelt (2010), however, define organizational creativity as "the creation of services, products, ideas, processes and procedures that people get by working together in complex social systems". Thus, we must understand that people should interact with processes, products and situations, before be creative. It is clear that people in isolation can lead to creative products, but in social interaction they may "build" spaces tending to liberate the creative spirit throughout the company.

From symbolic interactionism, creativity is transformation, manipulation of symbols, definition and generalization of roles. From constructivism creativity is context, community, always potential development area and integration. Therefore, these approaches can help management in organizations to "enhance" creativity, not as a process or collection of attributes, but as a culture.

From constructivism, Vygotsky talks about context preponderance, and proposes a sustained dynamic between humans involved in and other symbolic behavior. An organizational transformation through a sustained staff development, a critical and productive dialogue and collaborative efforts are necessary, as he stated. In light of what Vygotsky says, the company should give a continuous job enrichment that allows employees, guided by experts, to "try all the time its different zones of proximal development. Companies need to show themselves as community spaces where they could develop a sense of identity, unity of purpose and context of shared meanings among its members.

However, according to Goleman, Kaufman and Ray (1995), this demands an atmosphere of respect, an environment where people are confident sharing their "inspirations" with others. The point is that once people feels the responsibility and understand how to share meaning, and employees develop a moral conscience and freedom to produce, we will have the most imaginative solutions to organizational problems.

Creativity is a critical element in companies. It should never be promoted the idea that organizational processes are serious business work, but creativity is a matter of conceptual or ideological nature. Furthermore, attitudes are not built-in a vacuum, but we have to ask what characteristics and values in our organizations are fostering an attitude of carelessness, indifference and lack of motivation which will kill any possible creative spirit.

## CONCLUSION

Ray and Myers (1989) argue that creativity depends more on the people of the organization for which they work and working conditions. This means that no one can speak of organizational creativity without reference to creativity manifested by individuals who compose it.

Thus, to support its competitive edge in a deceptive environment, organizations need to develop their capacity to deal with the complex, contextual and circumstantial. To do this, management has to promote, among all members of the organization, a continuous wish to increase the stock of skills and abilities with which the company can count on.

The organizational design should be flexible enough so that you can influence the conduct of members of the organization, so that there is congruence between the purposes and goals of the business and of each person as part of it. To promote the creative spirit will be decisive in this regard.

This research showed that if we make sure that will be a full cooperation and interaction among all members of the organization and employees develop their capabilities to the fullest, we will produce a truly creative environment. The greater the degree of involvement of all human resources in companies in the process of participating and taking over the interactionist discourse of creativity, the greater the effect on the organizational creativity.

However, due to the qualitative nature of this research, we proposed a future survey research of what are the best practices in business innovation in United States, to prove if such companies show this discourse on creativity on their daily practices.

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## BIOGRAPHY

Juan Carlos Alicea Rivera is a Full Professor at University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. He can be contacted at: Graduate School of Business, Plaza Universitaria, North Tower, Fifth Floor, Ponce de Leon Avenue, San Juan, Puerto Rico, e-mail: jcalicea@uprrp.edu.