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Bringing Morgan's metaphors in organization contexts: An essay review

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Abstract: Recently, the issue of metaphors in organizational studies has fascinated researchers' attention and interests, leading to a substantial body of research generating theoretical understandings, philosophical concepts, insightful meanings, and experiential interpretations. In this review paper, the researchers critically approached reading and reviewing the studies which have been undertaken so far in order to achieve an orientation in metaphorical research on organizations. So, at first, Gareth Morgan's Images of Organization in terms of different metaphors were discussed and elaborated. Then, the review of a number of papers illustrated that a majority of research works on this issue focused on the theoretical and conceptual aspects of organizational metaphors without taking their practicality in real contexts into account. Based on this review paper, it is suggested that in order to enrich this area with innovative ideas, understandings, and insights, there is a need for further research which targets the practical use of metaphors in organizations.

Subjects: Management Education; Leadership; Corporate Governance; Organizational Studies; Organizational Change; Higher Education

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

It might be believed that metaphor is just discussed in the realm of literature as a technique when the author intends not to explicitly convey an issue; rather, (s)he prefers to implicitly accentuate, introduce, and remind an important issue, or even caution others about an event which is taken for granted or must be taken into account by the community. Interestingly, Gareth Morgan in 1986 introduced images of organizations as metaphors in the fields of Organization Management and Organization Behavior. In this regard, organizations in most research are considered as lived entities where the relationships of staff and the communications (constructive/destructive) which happen therein lead to the success or failure of the organizations to achieve their specified goals in both short and long term. Hence, we critically reviewed the studies which have been undertaken so far in order to achieve an orientation in metaphorical research on organizations.

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Keywords: organizational metaphors; organizational behavior; review paper; Morgan's metaphors; philosophical concepts; images of organization

1. Introduction

Metaphors as the conceptual and powerful instruments constitute a fruitful component not only in our daily conversations and discourses but also in academic research. Metaphors contain symbolic language which is "basic to the intellectual processes humans use to determine truth, facts, and meanings" (Ortony, 1979). These tools provide this chance for the people to interpret meanings and make sense of their worlds and lives (Ortony, 1975; Oswick, Keenoy, & Grant, 2002; Pepper, 1942; Smith & Simmons, 1983). People can also utilize them as a means to construct the meanings of their acts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Hence, they are viewed as an ingredient component of agents' process of sense-making and as a creative tool that can potently generate new understandings about situations and new kinds of acts on the basis of those understandings (Jacobs & Heracleous, 2006). It means, through this meaning-making process which is dynamic in nature, practices and activities are operationalized based on the emerged meanings, shared and cared in socially constructed and situated contexts. It is noteworthy to mention that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 2003). In other words, through studying metaphors, we start to perceive our cultural and physical experiences (Hogler et al., 2008) which are discursively shaped and developed.

Though they were initially neglected, interest in studying them burgeoned over the last two decades. Recently, researchers have come to this understanding that metaphors exist in organizational theory (Oswick et al., 2002; Tsoukas, 1991) and their concerns have been articulated over this issue that how they can use them as a lens to figure out the acts and practices related to organizations. According to Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008), a substantial body of organization research proposes that metaphorical representations related to organizations enable us to theorize and reason about this issue. As metaphors reflect a different view and vision concerning how we understand the world better, exploitation of these potential tools can be fruitful to push our perception and understandings about a complicated while contradictory phenomenon such as organizations.

The famous propagator of this perspective is Gareth Morgan who in his groundbreaking book, *Images of Organization* suggests a constructivist view on the knowledge and theory development concerning organizations. According to Jermier and Forbes (2011), Morgan's work can be considered as a worthwhile resource for specialists of the organization who wish to further investigate the metaphorical underpinnings of the field and the related literature which is drawn upon this work. These two researchers are of the belief that this book consists of the most resourceful and methodologically elaborated materials and is central for those struggling with paradigmatic options and radical approaches to evolving ecocentric science concerning organizations (see Hoffman & Bansal, 2012).

In fact, Morgan's metaphorical analysis (Morgan, 1997) is considered as one of the most intriguing approaches to analyze organizations and "put the development of organization theory in a philosophical and sociological context" (Morgan, 2011, p. 459). This approach is comprised of different metaphors where each forms a lens by which some new information and meanings are added to achieve an understanding regarding the description of organizations. As Morgan (1997) asserts, metaphors are the cornerstones of our understanding and thinking, and all the suggested theories about organizations are metaphorical in nature. In an essay review (1989), it has been described that Morgan believes that an awareness and understanding of metaphors and their applications assist administrators to make advancement in reading and obtaining knowledge about organizations. From Morgan's perspective, organizations are featured by intricacies, vagueness, and paradox. Hence, through gaining consciousness about metaphors as the appropriate instruments, one can interpret, understand, and acknowledge those intricacies, vagueness, and paradox. In Morgan's work, organizations are metaphorically imagined in different ways such as machines, brains, organisms, cultures, psychic prisons, systems of politics, transformation, and tools of domination. These metaphors

represent organization from different angles, potentially unearthing the hidden aspects and deepening our knowledge and understanding. In the pursuing sections, each of these metaphors concerning the issue of organizations is taken into account.

1.1. Organization as machine (mechanical or classical view)

Envisaging organization as a machine assumes that we need to put an emphasis on "increased efficiency and maximum utilization of labor" (Itkin & Nagy, 2014, p. 39). Based on this metaphor, organizations function in a similar fashion as machines. They are comprised of unbending structures, inhibiting fast adaptations and adjustments to any transformation (Itkin & Nagy, 2014). This thinking mode leads managers to strive for efficiency, precision, predictability, and reliability. A mechanistic system characterized by all these features (Dessler, 1980; Goldhaber, 2000; Morgan, 2006) underpins the bureaucracy of organization as each section plays a predefined role contributing to the functioning of the total system. According to Elkind (1998), bureaucracy-based organizations assume task division, top-down supervision, detailed regulations, and rules. In Morgan's (1986) sense, "great human cost" (p.31) is arisen by dint of this strand of thought as it pays no attention to the humanity in mindless bureaucratically oriented organizations.

1.2. Organization as brain

In the contemporary world allied with unprecedented high-speed technology, development, and changes, organizations are in need of persistent learning and the strategy of how to learn. The significance of this issue can be examined in the brain metaphor. From the perspective of organizations as brain metaphor, it is understood that an organization is considered as multi-faceted, holographic units which amalgamate centralized and decentralized characteristics, complex systems of learning, and information processing models (Itkin & Nagy, 2014). This metaphor has indeed been inspired by Ashby (1960), reformulating *requisite variety* theory. Drawing upon this theory, it is understood that the internal diversity existing within each self-controlling system is required to adjust itself to the variety and intricacy of the milieu in which it resides. That is, any system of control needs to possess the diversity and complexity as the controlling environment. This feature refers to the holographic design or the way that DNA of the total body is inserted into each cell. In sum, each organization operating based on this metaphor is capable of self-regulating, self-adjusting, and optimizing operational norms and standards. This process is what Morgan (1997) calls as double-loop learning due to complexity and development. It is noteworthy to mention that questioning, challenging, and changing rules and norms in each organization through creating democracy and openness can lead to further double learning and feedback.

1.3. Organization as organisms

Here, organizations are considered as the open-systems which resemble the living organisms and need to survive and grow through "adaptation, flexibility and the importance of the environment in which the organization exists" (Itkin & Nagy, 2014, p. 40). This view is in stark contrast with the machine metaphor assuming organizations as the lifeless apparatuses without the capability of developing, surviving, and even dying. A consideration of organizations in terms of living organism connotates this idea that an organization possesses a definite structure which consists of interrelated subsystems that are in alignment with each other. This view inspired by the contingency theory assumes that organizations as opening systems need to seek for any misalignments and dysfunctions and try to eliminate them. Thus, a meticulous management and examination of organizations can help managers to understand that for their survival and growth, organizations need "to satisfy and balance internal needs and to adapt to environment circumstances" (Itkin & Nagy, 2014, p. 41)

1.4. Organization as culture

In his paper, Smirach (1983) points out that the term culture has been taken from the field of anthropology and there is no compromise on its sense. So, culture in anthropology is considered as a system of shared meanings and symbols (Geertz, 1973). The culture within an organization is viewed as a continuous process that needs conscious efforts to make meaning, share ideas, gain insights, and communicate better. Cultural metaphors shape and transform reality (Morgan, 1996) and thereby,

through the creation of the shared reality, the foundation for obtaining an understanding regarding processes that generate systems of shared meanings (Morgan, 2006) is obtained. Cultures within the organization are constructed when individuals share task solutions (Quinn, 2005). As Hutchins (1995) believes task solutions develop out of groups' attempts to solve and confront problems and challenges. In fact, through sharing meanings and experiences based on what is learned in different contexts, cultural models and organizational cultures, which are unique to each organization, are socially and dynamically (re)shaped and constructed, enticing further transformations and creativity.

1.5. Organization as psychic prisons

This metaphor assists managers and leaders to achieve an understanding regarding un/conscious factors which affect people and groups and offers insights into how to control and deal with these negative effects and challenges occurring within organizations (Morgan, 2006). Managers are in need of recognition of un/conscious projections such as policies, mergers, and disturbing incidents which give rise to negative upshots in organizations. This metaphor stresses that being aware of conscious or unconscious effects and factors and their management through making the cultural transformation and changes can help managers to push the organization in the right direction.

1.6. Organization as a system of politics

In Morgan's (1986) sense, political metaphor inspires us to examine an organization as a loose network of individuals with a wide range of interests who have joined together for the aim of expediency. Seeing organizations as systems of politics, one can realize that a key concept in organizations is the power that can be considered as a means by "which conflicts of interest are resolved" (Walsham, 1993, p. 38). Foucault (1976) who is a prominent author on the issue of power stresses that power is exercised through the way in which local components combine to constitute a broader system of power advocated by the institutional components of the state. It means that subtle actions implemented within organizations are connected to the institutional exercises of power. According to Cobo, Rocha, Vanti, and Schneider (2012), this view does not take into account the group's interest and is often in favor of executives in authority. This can be examined in companies which operate as political systems since although there exists power distribution, the main objective will be performed by both subordinates and capital owners.

1.7. Organization as flux/transformation

The concepts associated with this metaphor discuss organizations as a matter "of self-reference, chaos, complexity, paradox, contradiction and crisis" (Itkin & Nagy, 2014, p. 47). As Cobo et al. (2012) put it, organizations which reflect flux and transformation are the ones that alter and evolve to conform to modification and evolution in the milieu; hence, their maintenance relies on internal and external surroundings. According to Walsham (1993), transformation can be in the form of a system of mutual causality generated by positive or negative feedback. In addition, it can be created through a dialectical process concerning contradictions which result from the inner contradictions within social arrangements. It can also be obtained by means of autopoietic demonstration of our acts. Autopoiesis, which is a term coined by Maturana and Varela (1980), describes the nature of living systems such as humans as self-referential. However, Morgan (1997) cautions about the risks associated with *egocentric organizations* which make boundaries around themselves and reduce their perception of the broader context in which they act. This is true in the case of internal organizations with strict and fulfilling nature in relation to the kind of view about the environment which is perilous to long-term adjustment and survival. This kind of system of organization, in fact, just views the world not the way it is.

1.8. Organization as a tool of domination

As Cobo et al. (2014) stress, in the case of organizations as tools of domination, the staff and managers are required to entirely devote themselves to their work and company. They think that their employment is insecure and experience lots of anxiety and stress on the job. In Walsham's (1993) terms, this metaphor implicates that certain individuals have a domineering influence over others. This perspective is indeed related to political metaphor, but while the former puts an emphasis on power as something which is inherent in the organization and not necessarily as something negative and involves in all human activities, the latter is concerned

with moral and ethical dimensions of the power use and doing political actions in organizations. Morgan (1997) believes that domination is exercised in different ways such as the exploitation and misuse of workers within each organization, institutionalized biases and discrimination in society, and the power abuse by means of international economy. Cooper (1986) suggests that information is an instance of dominance metaphor and social power as it discounts certain alternatives.

2. Metaphorical studies on organizations

Catching a glimpse of the literature and the available papers on the internet concerning the issue of metaphors and organization, one can understand that there is a paucity of studies in the case of this stream of research and most of the studies discuss theoretical implications and aspects of organizational metaphors, while investigations are rarely seen to examine the organizational metaphors in practice. Over the last few decades, a number of researchers have attempted to examine organizations from the lens of metaphors in their studies. While taking into account the eight metaphors suggested by Morgan, Walsham (1993) examined information systems within organizations. In this study, it was shown that each metaphor was connected to information systems research, and their strengths and weaknesses were also explicated. It was debated that the theoretical perspectives of organizations needed to be explicit in the theories of information systems research. In addition, the future of this research area was in need of benefitting from the pluralistic approach which put less focus on the organism and machine metaphors of organizations. Working on the theoretical development of organizational metaphors and inspired by Morgan's (1986) metaphors, Inkson (2003) also reviewed the different studies concerning the application of metaphors and creation of new ones in a career. Thus, this study, the suggested metaphors for career theory involved carrier as construction, inheritance, journey, matching, cycle, roles, relationships and encounters, story, and resource. It was discussed that all these metaphors operate as frameworks contributing to the development of career theory and have the potentiality to enhance thinking about a career beyond the use of the familiar metaphors.

In another study, Cornelissen (2005) firstly outlined the significance of metaphor which was needed for the construction of theories. Then, he presented critical reviews of the main theoretical strands in different studies on the issue of metaphor. The critical review of the theoretical research on metaphor illustrated the deficiencies associated with these studies due to the application of the comparison model in both theory and research. Taking theoretical dimensions of metaphors into consideration, he, then, proposed an alternative model of metaphor named the domains-interaction-model which was in contrast with the comparison model, mostly seen in different studies. Based on this model, metaphor consisted of the combination of total semantic domains, so that concepts and terms were constructed through a correspondence between them where the resulting meaning and image became creative. In this paper, the implications of this model for doing research and theorizing were discussed.

On investigation of management, organization, and metaphor, Gmür (2006) undertook a study and compared concepts and metaphors used to describe organizations in France and German. It was found that the use of metaphors is culturally bound and that the concepts which scientists and practitioners of these countries apply to describe organizations can be reduced into two metaphors, sail and chart. Based on the organizational theory of German, this image of the organization is dominant that there are a centripetal structure and entity for the effective differentiation and integration of individuals' tasks to tangible aims. While in the case of French theories and practice concerning organizations, this image of the organization is prevalent that it is considered as a transitory arrangement and there exists a common directing image for all the parties toward achieving a given goal.

Concerning the applicability of metaphors in real contexts of organizations, Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008) implemented a study to examine the extent to which organizations were impacted

by the metaphorical representations and how different metaphors influenced the development of theories and academic understanding and thinking concerning organizations. These researchers asked different professors from business schools in the UK to evaluate different metaphors with respect to their influence on theory construction. Also, they scrutinized this matter that whether and to what extent the metaphors had assisted in elucidating and developing their insights about organizations. The results of their study showed that the ability of metaphors for developing and clarifying theoretical understanding depended on: (1) the degree to which that metaphor is considered to capture the multiple outstanding characteristics of organizations. It means that in this case, the metaphor is more representative and theoretically more insightful about organizations, and can be more feasibly elaborated and completed into evolving metaphorical meanings. So with respect to this issue, scholars might use those metaphors which direct them toward the right paths; (2) the ease with which the metaphor is perceived. That is, comprehensibility of metaphors can be as an explicatory instrument which shapes and elucidates the theoretical perception of organizations.

Chatelain-Ponroy (2010) discussed this issue that the role of metaphors for the provision of organizational theory is cognitive, theoretical, and didactic. This mode of thinking regarding the issue of metaphors allows researchers to obtain a better understanding of organizations. This researcher then pointed out that metaphors could also be restrictive and distorting concerning our own understandings of organizations. At the end of this paper, it was noted that there was a need for an alternative metaphor to show better understanding of different dimensions of the control practices. Further, Itkin and Nagy (2014) provided a full account of Morgan's metaphors in their paper and elaborated on each of the eight metaphors. They came to this conclusion that metaphors are fruitful in that they help us to understand organizations, make sense of their structure, style of leadership, management behavior, and control through attaching meanings to them. They also suggested that due to the multidimensional nature of metaphors, multiple aspects of organizations are emerged, giving rise to the expansion of our knowledge, views, and visions. From their perspective, there is a need for further research to investigate how this approach can be applied in different local organizations, political organizations, hospitals, and universities.

Taking a theoretically oriented stance, Küpers, Deeg, and Edwards (2015) interpreted and discussed the bridge as a new metaphor in the area of metaphorical organizations. This metaphor mirrors interrelational positions or space between relations, contributing to the encouragement of taking the approach of pluralism and multiplicity in studies on organizations. In their paper, they elaborated on the role of metaphors as bridges and bridges as metaphors and how they act as mediating instruments to present a framework for understanding and outlining organizations. In another attempt, Faghih, Bavandpour, and Forouharfar (2016) utilized the concepts related to biological metaphor and made an analogy between the management of organizations and a human body. In this paper, they analyzed the subsystems and functions of the human body which were analogous to the subsystems of organizations and their similarly analogous diseases and symptoms. Through this study, certain therapies and remedies were suggested for the improvement of organizations. Drawing upon the concepts related to biological metaphor, their research provided insights for more research on organizational management within the area of clinical pathology of organizations.

From the practical side of organizational metaphors, Oswick and Montgomery (2016) approached the issue and conducted a case study. In this case study which was qualitative in nature, they investigated the understanding and thinking of team leaders, supervisors, and managers of a UK company with respect to organizational metaphors. Through this research, they posed two queries from the participants such as *what animal do you compare your organization with?* and *what part of a car do you compare your organization with?* Their responses about animal resemblance revealed aspects of change in the organization while disclosed other aspects such as corporate strategies in addition to certain features of an organization such as movement and direction. They concluded that the use of metaphor in their study elicited uncontaminated perspectives and attitudes showing multiple understandings and interpretations which have been unarticulated about the context.

3. Conclusions

In this review paper, I briefly discussed the significance of organizational metaphors and their contribution to illuminating the different aspects and dimensions of organizations, theoretical underpinnings, and practical considerations. Based on a thorough review of pertinent papers and studies, the significance of Morgan's (1986) metaphors and his analytical approach on theoretical development and change of thinking mode and understandings of researchers working on the issue of organizations was elaborated and debated. Then, the review of the studies showed that thus far, most of the works in this area represent the use of organizational metaphors in theory and a focus on the sole illustration of metaphors in advancing concepts, new theories, philosophies, frameworks, and paradigmatic directions. The application of organizational metaphors in authentic contexts is of greater importance as this type of research not only provides us with further insights and acumens for future researchers but also gives hints and clues to those who are (in)directly involved in managing and directing organizations for further prosperity and growth. This type of research can undoubtedly be worthwhile as it targets methodological issues concerning organizational metaphors in practice which have remained untouched from the access of researchers and lead to burgeoning novel ideas, views, and visions regarding multifarious problems and concerns which organization is currently involved.

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