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The Collective Unconscious at the Organizational Level: The Manifestation of Organizational Symbols

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Abstract

In this research we articulate the concept of collective unconscious at the organizational level and propose a framework based on the organizational symbolism literature regarding the sources and manifestations of the collective unconscious construct. We first present the collective unconscious from the lens of analytical psychology and suggest a theoretical link with organization science in order to develop an understanding regarding “what does collective unconscious indicate” at the organizational context. Then we draw on the organizational symbols literature to explore the sources and manifestations of collective unconscious in the organization. Particularly this research generates an integrative framework between organization science and analytical psychology. It suggests that stories told regarding the processes and relationships of the organization, the metaphors generated to develop and enhance meaning and common language serving to communicate meaning throughout the organizations are the sources where collective unconscious is preserved and manifested through the usage of these symbols. This research is important for theory and practice in two aspect. First this research provides a basis to explain organizational phenomena which cannot be explained through the conventional positivist/functionalist school of thought. Second it encourages organizational scholars to not only focus on the visible but also invisible, hidden aspects of organizational life such as the unconsciousness at the organizational level which is critical in determining the behavior of organizations.

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1. Introduction

From the lens of a peripheral discipline to management and organization theory, namely analytical psychology, the concept of organizational symbols have much to offer to the research and practice of organization science.

Symbols serve as the unique social indicators; they are the foci of social values, and they unveil the hidden, unconscious knowledge within the organizational layers. Symbols embed the underlying character, the thought system, value propositions, cognitive schemata sui generis and the hidden layers of meaning inherent in all human forms of organization.

The analytical psychology, in parallel term Jungian psychology has offered a critical concept for the understanding of human psychology; the collective unconscious. Collective unconscious is different than unconsciousness at the individual level because it indicates the ancestral, inherited knowledge in form of archetypes which are never conscious to the human. Although unconscious, it perfectly shapes the thoughts, meanings, and actions of individuals by driving the individual psyche. However, although there is an intensifying research inquiry regarding how organizations generate, communicate and negotiate deeply held, hidden; i.e. unconscious knowledge collectively at the organizational level, there is limited research effort trying to identify the sources and manifestations of this collective unconscious. Indeed, how do organizations hold their unconscious values, norms, beliefs and associations and reflect these to their actions honestly and free from any institutional pressures?

At this point, organizational symbols act as the sources of “unthought known” which enable free-association, non-judgement and non-intentional reactions revealing the true nature of thought (Lawrence, 2005). Explicitly, organizational symbols are suggested as the sources and manifestations of collective unconsciousness in the organizations which allow organizational members to explicate the unsayable or unnoticed by making the hidden social meanings, the realm of the organization’s collective unconscious. Hereby this research proposes that organizations have a collective unconscious at the organizational level which forms as a function of individual unconscious but operates at the organizational level. The collective unconscious at the organizational level represents the reservoir of the experiences of the organizational collectivities as for the individuals collective unconscious refers to the “reservoir of the experiences of human species” (Jung, 1948).

Building on this background of organizational symbols, explicitly; stories, metaphors and common language, the rationale behind the research inquiry concerning this research of relating the unconsciously held knowledge, inherent values, assumptions and thoughts, anchored in the unconsciously shared meanings of the organizational collective is that organizational symbols act as the repertoires of hidden meaning. The organizational collective unconscious is manifested through organizational symbols namely; stories, metaphors and common language. They are as Jung proposes for human collectivities, the archetypes which represent the hidden knowledge, values, thoughts and ways of knowing and comprehending for organizational members. The collective unconscious at the organizational level therefore contributes to the understanding of organizational phenomena particularly the ability to make, communicate and negotiate meaning.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. The Collective Unconscious at the Organizational Context

The depth of psychology provided by Freud has been offered as a critical way to emphasize the embeddedness of social processes to the human psychology in 1970's. With the emergence of Frankfurt School critical theorists (Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse etc.) the Freudian psychoanalytic theory has been applied in social sciences and particularly in organization science as an emphasis on the nature of individual psychology as a basis for the understanding of collective social/organizational processes (Bowles, 1990). However little attention has been given to the arguments made by Carl Jung, one of the most distinguished disciples of Freud.

The German psychologist Carl Gustav Jung's concept of collective unconscious is used to refer to the pattern of deep unconsciousness instinctively held by all human beings which are retained in archetypes. Archetypes indicate the ancestral, inherited experiences registered collectively to human brain which reflect/manifest the collective unconscious (Carr, 2002). They structure and shape the understanding of social life and provide manageable ways, images and meanings to the chaos and complexity of external world. The contents of the collective unconscious are

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