Organizations as Potpourri

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Abstract

This paper reviews the metaphor literature and concludes with the value and application of a new metaphor, the potpourri. "The use of metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing" (G. Morgan, 2006, p. 3). According to G. Morgan (2006), metaphor partially distorts because while it is accurate in aspects of the compared items, there are areas where the metaphor is inappropriate. Hence, G. Morgan posited that though organizational theory as a metaphor partially distorts, researchers can gain valuable complementary and competing insights from the metaphors while building on the strengths of each unique perspective. According to the second definition of The Britannica Dictionary (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., n.d.), potpourri is a collection of related or unrelated items, which could be a musical performance involving jazz, folk, blues, and rock music or a book containing different stories on the family, food, and religion. The potpourri metaphor says that many other metaphors exist simultaneously within an organization with their attendant designs, structures, boundaries, and environment despite the overall metaphor type of the organization. So, a potpourri organization manifests different designs, structures, and boundaries. Therefore, the potpourri metaphor shows G. Morgan's position that metaphors give researchers complementary and competing potpourri of related and unrelated items insights while aligning their strengths within an organization.

Keywords: potpourri metaphor, organizational design, organizational structure, organizational boundary

"The use of metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing" (G. Morgan, 2006, p. 3). According to G. Morgan (2006), metaphor partially distorts because while it is accurate in aspects of the compared items, there are areas where the metaphor is inappropriate. Hence, G. Morgan posited that though organizational theory as a metaphor partially distorts, researchers can gain valuable complementary and competing insights from the metaphors while building on the strengths of each unique perspective.

G. Morgan (2006) stated, "All theories of organization and management are based on implicit images and metaphor" (p. 4). G. Morgan studied the role and functions of metaphor and explained the meaning of specific organizational components like design, structure, boundaries, and environment (p. 4). Ortony (1979) stated that metaphors have representative language that helps humans process facts, meaning, and truth rationally. According to Ortony (1975) and Oswick et al. (2002), symbolic languages help humans have a glimpse of meaning and make sense of this world. Lakoff and Johnson (1990) equally stated that humans could use metaphors as resources to explain their activities and experiences and describe a phenomenon through another.

Oswick et al. (2002) and Tsoukas (1991) revealed that more researchers have begun to open up to and understand the importance of metaphors in organizational theories over the past two decades. It has helped researchers understand an organization's activities and performance. Cornelissen and Kafouros (2008) said that as metaphors help humans to be aware of issues, they can also help give insights into complex entities like organizations.

Jermier and Forbes (2011) commended the works of G. Morgan (2006) on organizations as foundational. J. L. Morgan (1979) declared that organizations are metaphorical. Other scholars have built on the works to understand metaphor further in organizational studies.

Cornelissen et al. (2008) commented on the organizational metaphors of G. Morgan (2006) and the illustration and the build-up from other organizational authors as showing the vast variance in theoretical perspectives on the study of organizations. The eight organizational metaphors by G. Morgan are machine, organism, brain, cultures, political systems, psychic prisons, flux and transformation, and instruments of domination.

J. L. Morgan (1979) posited that metaphors help understand, interpret, and recognize these organizational complexities to gain insight into the complexities of organizations. Thus, in seeking the practical expression of the eight metaphors, this study discovered that no organization exhibits wholly a metaphor. Organizations have a bit of each of the eight metaphors embedded in them. This paper studied the role and functions of metaphor. It also explained the meaning of specific organizational components like design, structure, boundaries, and environment.

This scenario is often due to diverse departmental requirements, statutory or otherwise, within organizations or industry. It could also be a result of an organizational differentiation strategy; hence, the discovery of organizations as potpourri. There is a discussion of G. Morgan's (2006) metaphors first. The paper reviews the metaphor

literature and concludes with the value and application of the potpourri organization metaphor.

Morgan's Metaphors

Mechanistic

Mechanistic metaphor portrays organizations as machines (bureaucracy) to achieve predetermined objectives (Dessler, 1989; Goldhaber, 2006; G. Morgan, 2006). In terms of the organizational elements of environmental uncertainty and flexibility, mechanistic organizations thrive best in a stable environment (Hatch, 2018) and are inflexible due to their social structure (Burns & Stalker, 2005; Itkin & Nagy, 2014). According to scholars (Burns & Stalker, 2005; Elkind, 1998), their social structure has high horizontal and vertical differentiation, high formalization, centralized decision making, standardization through written rules, procedures, standard of procedures, close supervision with authority, status based on position, and vertical communication. Examples of organizations that represent this metaphor are UPS, FedEx, and fast-food restaurants like McDonald's (Hatch, 2018; G. Morgan, 2006).

Organismic

Organismic metaphor sees organizations as organisms that seek to understand and manage organizational needs and environmental relations (Itkin & Nagy, 2014; G. Morgan, 2006). They are suitable for stable environments (Hatch, 2018), and their social structure shows they are more flexible than mechanistic organizations (Burns & Stalker, 2005). Burns and Stalker (2005) said that organismic organizations' structure has high/complex horizontal and vertical integration, low formalization, decentralized decision making, mutual adjustment through joint problem solving and interaction, personnel expertise, creativity without supervision, lateral communication, and expertise orientation. Examples of organismic organizations are hospitals, universities, and consulting firms like McKinsey, PwC, Ernst & Young, and KPMG (Hatch, 2018).

Learning/Brain

Learning metaphor views organizations as brains that focus on information processing, learning, and intelligence, which help to assess and understand modern organizations (G. Morgan, 2006). Learning organizations adapt well to an unstable environment (Hatch, 2018) and are flexible due to their social structure (Hatch, 2018). Due to their high environmental uncertainty, their social structure entails high differentiation, high integration (direct communication), and decentralization (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). G. Morgan (2006) mentioned other metaphors such as culture, political, psychic prison, flux and transformation, and the domination metaphor.

Significance of Metaphors for Organizational Life

The significance of these metaphors for organizational life—culture, society, system, and functional analyses—is vast. An example of such significance under psychic prison is how Nazi Germany affected their time's culture, system, and society (G. Morgan, 2006). Due to the social structure of bureaucracy, employees in a mechanistic organization thrive on routinized jobs; achieving their compartmentalized hierarchical level, role or function's goals and objectives; and taking and implementing instructions/orders (G. Morgan, 2006).

Creative and innovative employees are more suited to organismic and learning organizations. Burns and Stalker (2005) said that though organismic organizations operate in a stable environment, their social structure is expertise oriented. The staff must collaborate flexibly and not be role conscious in solving organizational problems (G. Morgan, 2006).

On the other hand, though learning organizations require the same type of employees, they operate within high environmental uncertainties. Thus, their social structure requires employees with the flexibility to use their discretion (Hatch, 2018) with a higher level of mental competence (G. Morgan, 2006). According to G. Morgan (2006), "Organizational members must be skilled in understanding the paradigms, metaphors, mindsets, or mental models that underpin how the organization operates" (p. 89).

Potpourri - A New Metaphor

According to the second definition of *The Britannica Dictionary*, potpourri is a collection of related or unrelated items, which could be a musical performance involving jazz, folk, blues, and rock music or a book of different stories on the family, food, and religion. The potpourri of unrelated items applies more to organizations. The potpourri metaphor says that many other metaphors exist simultaneously within an organization with their attendant designs, structure, boundaries, and environmental peculiarity, notwithstanding the type of organization. Therefore, a potpourri organization manifests different designs (Quinn & Cameron, 1988), structures (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), and boundaries (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992) within an organization.

G. Morgan (2006) said that metaphors distort as they do not apply to all aspects of organizations. Potpourri's metaphor says that in those aspects of the organization, a metaphor (e.g., the machine metaphor) does not apply; other metaphors may likely apply. This paper uses multinational corporations (MNCs) as a case for the potpourri metaphor. MNCs operate globally with differences in cultures, time zones, people, and environmental volatility (Javidan et al., 2006).

Environment

Population ecologists and institutional theorists posited that the organization is passive and becomes what the environmental impact turns it into (Hatch, 2018). In other words, Hatch (2018) said the state of the environment dictates the type of organizational response, hence the potpourri of responses within MNCs based on each unit/subsidiary's location's volatility level.

The state of the environment dictates the type of organizational response. Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) stated that in an unstable environment, organizations would have structures that protect them from the impact of instability. Lawrence and Lorsch said there would be a decentralized, horizontal social structure that favors faster decision making to resolve issues as they occur. In a stable environment, the organization would do the opposite—have a tall structure with a centralized structure.

In addition, organizations, including their leaders, display the potpourri metaphor when different environmental challenges affect different business areas. The potpourri metaphor says the organization will employ different designs and structures in each department to tackle the environmental threat. An example is an organization that needs foreign exchange to get raw materials for manufacturing purposes and leverages information technology (IT) to maximize output and lead time to customers.

The foreign exchange department must adopt a decentralized structure to curtail foreign exchange volatility with a fixated focus on the exchange market. In production, many aspects could be mechanistic with either robotics or human staff, which could still be highly centralized. In contrast, the IT department may operate decentralization due to the high rate of change in the profession. While the treasury unit in the accounting department works in a decentralized way to curtail foreign exchange volatility, other units in the same department may work in a centralized way to avoid internal risks of errors and fraud.

Design

Previously, subsidiaries/units within MNCs chose the designs appropriate for their locations. However, Weick (1979) described the use of contradictory designs within a business unit in an organization as hypocrisy. Weick observed that organizations that embrace adaptation tend to be hypocritical. Hypocrisy is another way to explain organizations as potpourri. Weick explained hypocrisy as contradictory designs existing within a business unit in an organization.

In addition, there could be different designs for different projects and staff. For instance, men receive paternity leave, and women take maternity leave. Contract employment terms differ from full-time jobs; the former may involve virtual and selected on-site workdays, which do not apply to full-term staff. A different design can also be in the

same organization to encourage diversity. Diversity may include allowance for Muslims, Buddhi, and Vatican holidays, with allowance to work conveniently to accommodate different time zones.

Organizations such as potpourri can operate simultaneously at different periods to meet different needs with different appropriate designs to exploit and explore the circumstances for the benefits and advancement of corporate goals. Because the differences in the different time frames do not matter, the organization can work. If it is in the night, morning, or afternoon, the organization can work and exploit and explore the advancement of the organizational goal. This notion of paradox aligns with Quinn and Cameron's (1988) work on building organizations capable of operating in multiple time frames and learning modes.

Organization as potpourri, in line with Quinn and Cameron's (1988), could also mean working with different generations of employees with different learning modes. It could be with Generation X, Y, or Z or baby boomers. The way each generation learns is unique to their generation. In the same way that within organizations, different business units engage different designs to meet their unique needs, projects, or innovative ideas.

Structure

Organizational structure is how organizations divide, organize, and coordinate work (Ahmady et al., 2016). The structure generally refers to the stable relationships among parts of a system or entity (Hatch, 2018). Like the MNC, a potpourri organization operates different structures in the same body. The system or entity could be a body or a building. The structure could be social or physical (Hatch, 2018), and it has to deal with functions, people, roles, communications, control and authority, and achievement of organizational objectives. The structure could be flat and tall with decentralized or centralized administration (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Thus, a potpourri organization could have different structures simultaneously within the same organization.

Hatch (2018) explained that social structure comes from patterns of relationships between roles and responsibilities among an organization's members, which can change due to changes in the pattern. However, some derive a sense of stability in the social structure despite changes. Hatch gives examples of social structure as centralization/decentralization, differentiation/ integration, and size. Further examples are high/low formalization, standardization through written rules procedures, and vertical communication/mutual adjustment through joint problem solving and interaction (Burns & Stalker, 2005). Hatch described the physical structure as

an organization is, in part, a physical entity possessing material form that extends in space, as can be seen in the location, design, and layout of buildings that house people, furniture, equipment, and decorations, along with other artifacts of its existence. (p. 273)

On the surface, it may be seen as a decentralized, innovative organization. However, functions like accounts, finance, and treasury may have a centralized structure to forestall—for instance, fraud, which a breakdown of processes shared by many individuals could forestall. The breakdown of the approval process is decentralized, with each role in the approval process unable to use any initiative to approve than what has been clearly stated and written.

The physical arrangement of the office equally tells of an organizational structure. Irrespective of the style of the organization's physical structure, each department still adopts the same in line with its role—for instance, customer service in a banking organization. While customers queue for service, certain levels of clientele do not even come to the banking hall, but the bank goes to them. Also, they are given seats in private rooms for comfort if needed. So, same industry, same structure, same department, different service.

Boundaries

Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) cautioned that though organizations are changing, it does not mean that boundaries around authority lines, job roles, and control are extinct; the changes only blur the boundaries. Hence, it requires sensitivity to ensure that staff work together to achieve organizational objectives. Though the traditional organization is dead, it does not mean authority, skill, talent, and perspectives are extinct (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992). Instead, it makes it more difficult due to the blurring of job roles, control, and authority lines. Staff in innovative organizations need sensitivity to these to thrive and work together, not against one another, to achieve organizational roles.

For a potpourri organization, boundary means different boundaries for different relationships. As Maxwell (2008) stated, leaders lead each follower differently, as they want the leader to lead them, not as the leader wants to. It aligns with the differences in personality, exposures, and beliefs cum values. The potpourri metaphor is equally evident in the individuality of organizational members, leaders, and followers.

Some leaders are considerate, believing that by being considerate, they will be able to inspire their followers in for-profit and not-for-profit to be their best. Others demonstrate that the word *considerate* means being hard on their followers and following rigid rules. Enforcing the rules resonates with them as being considerate of the agreed means of achieving the same objectives.

The first set of leaders could be those more mindful of the people and their peculiar situations. It is easier to take the second stance than the first as it does not require much critical thinking. Taking the second stance requires complex thinking to be flexible and open to experience possible positive emergent change.

The same applies to followers. Some see leaders and organizations as people and places to get. Their thoughts and actions are towards what is in it for them. To such, the means do not matter but the goal of personal advancement. The category may not be easily identified until organizational survival clashes with personal advancement plans during a crisis. In such instances as during COVID-19, there were massive layoffs but a few readjustments to preserve people's jobs. Leaders who think of dispensing with staff to keep the bottom-line robust show a mindset of not being people-centric. Accounting-wise, this is a smart move.

Staff have different temperaments and thus see things from different lenses. Despite this, work people must work together within the structure to achieve the organizational objectives. The potpourri metaphor posits that leaders need to lead each follower as they want their leader to lead them. It would lead to a potpourri of actions that will differ almost to the number of subordinates irrespective of whether the organization adopted stipulated or unstipulated boundaries. It will lead to confident subordinates ready to give their best for organizational goals.

Self-Managed Organizations as Potpourri

Self-managed organizations (SMOs) show characteristics of potpourri organizations with different designs, structures, boundaries, and environments existing simultaneously within an organization. Martela (2019) revealed that SMOs have emerged with no superior–subordinate relationship, but everyone is self-motivated to achieve their tasks, accountable only to peers on self-assigned duties. The organization resolves challenges like how to be motivated, who assigns duties, and how to coordinate tasks towards corporate goals through the choice of organization structure or design deemed fit. Examples are Buurtzorg (Gray et al., 2015), Zappos, Morning Star, and Valve.

In SMOs, Martela (2019) said that decision making can be top-down or down-up. In task division, leaders and employees have the authority and responsibility to initiate and take on new tasks. In SMOs, task allocation is peer-based among employees with authority to fill task roles. It could be from either side, with individuals taking initiatives aligned with corporate groups.

In SMOs, they use remuneration to reward acceptable behaviors. Also, employees get monetary rewards with, sometimes, team-based bonuses. In addition, employees are rewarded with opportunities to participate in significant projects in the future (Martela,

2019), though the emphasis is more on the intrinsic reward of the job. Thus, the organization gives rewards based on contribution to the corporate objectives.

Conclusion

The potpourri metaphor depicts what is obtainable in MNCs, where they display what Weick (1979) depicted as *hypocrisy* because different subsidiaries have contradictory designs within the same organizations. For instance, the same MNC that obeys environmental laws in its home country disobeys them with impunity in their host nations and community as an instrument of domination (G. Morgan, 2006). However, the potpourri metaphor could enhance mutually beneficial relationships between MNCs and their host nation and community.

In relating the importance of metaphors to organizational theories, Oswick et al. (2002) and Tsoukas (1991) revealed that metaphors helped researchers understand an organization's activities and performance better. Thus, the host nation could understand that the MNCs only respond to their environmental stimuli. Then, they could address their environment with policies and national values that compel the MNCs to align with their head office's ethics in the host nations.

There is room for further research on different types of organizations, such as potpourri. It could be a national or local organization. It could be for profit and not for profit. Any organization could be potpourri to achieve its goal seamlessly in changing and sometimes stable environments. Probably more important is empirical research to verify this metaphor and its embedded benefits to improving organizational performance globally.

About the Author

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She is passionate about fueling the entrepreneurship culture in sub-Saharan Africa with sustainability. Thus, her research interests include organizational sustainability, authentic leadership, and Christian living in the workplace and marketplace.

Oluwatoyin contributed to the 2021 ARR, and the Journal of Biblical Perspective in Leadership (JBPL) published her paper.

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