

“WE ARE A FAMILY” – A CRITICAL ORGANIZATIONAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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—Abstract —

Organizations are arenas where discourses are built and implicated. One of the discourses used in the organizations is the “family” discourse which is realized as “we are a family”. Such an approach aims to construct a meaning that contains not just only pragmatist and rational relations in an organization, but also an illusion of an intense emotional experience. Nature of such a discourse is paradoxical. As an intentional constructed entity organization lacks basic characteristics of a family such as kinship, family bonding and intimate relationships. Therefore, the main assumption of the study is that such a family discourse helps hiding the contradictions and the socio-political structure of the organizations that emerge from the nature-of-organization. Accordingly, the definition of family concept is examined within disciplines of psychology/sociology and the reality of the family discourse is compared with a critical perspective. This study aims to demonstrate hidden motives that lie beneath the organizational discourses employed by the executives in order to manipulate and manage employees. Such recognition would help to prevent the abuse of organizational power under the name of management.

Key Words: *Critical Management Studies, Organizational Discourse Analysis, Family Metaphor*

JEL Classification: M19

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been always a matter to understand employees’ intentions and predict their behaviors in the organizational context. In accordance with that different behavioral concepts are studied in the organization and management literature. Among these concepts there are many concepts taken into consideration as variables by the scholars such as trust, commitment, conflict, culture or organizational citizenship. In different models analyzing such concepts there is always an affective side related to human psychology. It is important to cover different affective and emotional sides of an employee in order to recognize their needs and expectations so that they can be adapted to organizational aims. In addition to that managers also give importance to the emotional aspect in order to make their employees much more attached and loyal to the organization.

However, analyzing all these variables and trying to predict behaviors do not explain all the relations and feelings in the organizations. Organizations are complex social structures that consist of many different aspects. Today, they are not just economic entities or places where all people work in harmony or value-free places. Organizations are place for power arenas (Clegg &

Dunkerley, 1980) place where conflicts arise (Rahim, 2001), and place where discourses are built and implicated (Grant, Harvey, Oswick & Putnam, 2004).

In order to understand and analyze such complex and complicated organizations, metaphors are used very often by the scholars (Cornelissen, 2005; Morgan, 1980). Metaphors are used in order to understand the reality with the help of a supportive image. They help us how to view and make sense of the world, how to learn, how to think, how to create knowledge and how to behave in a social setting. But, metaphors are not value-free representations, they declare ideologies and worldviews, therefore they have implications on what to think and what to have as information. Family metaphor as one of the organizational metaphors gets some characteristics from one context (family) to another (organization) in order to help organizational members to interpret the organizational realities and create a meaning (Smith & Esienberg, 1987: 369).

In such a complicated place like a business organization in order to keep people together and manage them towards a common aim of the organization the meanings and discourses are constructed via metaphors. This study aims to analyze one of these discourses used with a family metaphor as “we are a family” with a critical perspective. Analyzing discourses help to understand how the meanings in an organization are directed or manipulated by the managers. Examining family metaphor and discourse would help understanding how such a meaning given to work and organization relationship would help managers and businesses make employees emotionally attached to organization for the benefit of the organization.

It should be also stated that family-businesses or family owned organizations are not in the scope of this study. The focus is on big businesses using family metaphor as a part of their culture even though they have no kinship or family bonding. Therefore, as following family concept is analyzed and then through organization definition business concept is examined. After that, discourse definition is given and theoretically “family metaphor” and discourse creation based on this metaphor will be discussed. Additionally, with a critical approach, the paradoxes of being a family member and an organization employee are analyzed. Finally the existence reason of such a study is given on the basis of critical discourse analysis.

2. WHAT IS A FAMILY?

Encyclopedia Britannica defines family as “a group of persons united by the ties of marriage, blood, or adoption, constituting a single household and interacting with each other in their respective social positions, usually those of spouses, parents, children, and siblings” (Britannica Online, 2009). In addition to such a basic definition, family scholars still discuss about the definition of a family. It is stated that there is not an agreed upon definition. For instance, Settles (1999) claim that on the basis of purpose and practice the definition of family may change, also Peters (1999) mention about the changing definitions according to social and structural changes in the western world. Levin and Trost (1992: 350) give importance to inquire the meaning of family on the personal basis and they state that “family is a social group consisting of at least one parent-child unit or at least one spousal unit”. At societal level Parsons (1955) focuses on stabilization of adult personality and nurturing children. Besides, Murdock (1949: 1) is the first scholar mention about “nuclear family” and according to him a family is “a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction. It includes adults of both sexes, at least two of

whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adults". Another main definition of family with a functional perspective is Coser's (1964: xvi) definition as a group manifesting the following organizational attributes: It finds its origin in marriage; it consists of husband, wife, and children born in their wedlock, though other relatives may find their place close to this nuclear group, and the group is united by moral, legal, economic, religious and social rights and obligations (including sexual rights and prohibitions as well as such socially patterned feelings as love, attraction, piety, and awe).

Yet, in everyday language family is defined as a social group that is legally, biologically and emotionally connected. One of the close definitions of family to everyday language would be a family involves two or more persons who live in the same household and are related through blood, marriage, or adoption (Levin, 1999: 94).

All these definitions help understanding what we should consider something as family. There are common points such as kinship, emotional bonding, legal and economic aspects forming a family. These are the main characteristics that define and differentiate the family from different organizations or systems. For the study it is important to cover the literal meaning of the family so that it can be figured out the inconvenience of usage of family metaphor for the organizations. But, it is also essential to discuss the main definition of a modern business organization.

3. WHAT IS A BUSINESS ORGANIZATION?

Basically an organization is defined as a consciously coordinated social entity with a relatively identifiable boundary, which functions on a relatively continuous basis to achieve a common goal or set of goals (Robbins & Barnwell, 2002: 6).

In addition to these common characteristics the definitions and the concept of organization may differ on the basis of assumptions and paradigms (see Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The historical periods beginning from the late 1800s also has affect on understanding the organization concept such as classical, modern, symbolic-interpretive and postmodern (Hatch & Cunliffe, 2006: 15). Scott (1998: 24 - 28) also gives definitions of organization on the basis of historical appearance considering important characteristics of organizations distinguishing them from related types of collectivities such as families or small groups. Accordingly, there are three definitions of organizations;

- Rational system: Organizations are collectivities oriented to the pursuit of relatively specific goals and exhibiting relatively highly formalized social structures.
- Natural system: Organizations are collectivities whose participants share a common interest in the survival of the system and who engage in collective activities, informally structured, to secure this end.
- Open system: Organizations are systems of interdependent activities linking shifting coalitions of participants; the systems are embedded in – dependent on continuing exchanges with and constituted by – the environment in which they operate.

Regarding all these definitions, Handel (2002: 1) mentions that organizations are

- Deliberately planned groups

- With some specific apparent goal or goals
- Generally designed to outlive the participation of the particular individuals who participate at any one time
- Having a more or less well developed set of formal rules
- A relatively fixed structure of authority, roles and responsibilities that is independent of the personal characteristics of those filling the roles at any particular time.

However, for the study the basic definition of business organization (business will be used for the following) is sufficient since the main argument is based on the usage of family metaphor in businesses. Reminding the characteristics and the definition above, a business, principally, is the organization where people work as professionals in order to satisfy varying needs and expectations.

Businesses are the units acting in the economic system and producing products or services for the society in exchange of money. Since the development of capitalism businesses have been improving and employing people for maintaining their function and survival. Today, businesses are nearly the most important part of our lives since in high amounts of people are dependent on them to earn their lives and people spend almost half of their day at them.

The differences in the literal definitions clearly demonstrate that the businesses cannot be like families. But, there is another concern of study that why such a metaphor is used and why such a family discourse is created in a business. As businesses have such an important meaning for the people who work, it is also important for the managers and the business to manage these people in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness. To do that managers as a part of their roles in a business also seek for gaining cooperation and compliance from subordinates. Besides since human are seen as the most vital "resource" for the organization, their management for the sake of business and their contribution to the business should be handled carefully. Since businesses are not just technical formalized systems, they also include informal and especially emotional aspects. That is why emotional aspects are studied by many scholars and given importance by the managers. Especially with the informal and emotional characteristic of an organization a family metaphor is associated and here comes its usage as a discourse in order to control and gain compliance of employees.

4. FAMILY DISCOURSE AND BUSINESSES

In the literature it is seen that family metaphor usage is very common for the businesses. According to Casey (1999: 156) "many companies, from manufacturing, operations and supermarket chains, to hospitals and airline companies, promote themselves in the market place and to employees as caring, familial communities". Different studies (Boje, 1995; Casey, 1999; Gabriel, 1999; Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001; Legge, 1999; Parker, 1995) are conducted in order to cover effects of such a metaphor usage on employees and on the businesses. Even the congruity between organizations and families are analyzed (Brotheridge & Lee, 2006). Accordingly, family metaphor in businesses may be thought as a positive and motivating factor so that employees would work in a family-like environment that they all emotionally attach to the organization and have a strong sense of belonging to the business. By creating a discourse via family metaphor in a business, a belief may be created that all the people are really important part of a big family and

the conflicts would not be so harsh or the disagreements would be solved in the family. Besides, such a metaphor usage is associated with the organizational culture and it is claimed that organization as a family is a part of creating a caring, familial communities that promotes involvement and commitment. According to Parker (1998: 76) it is all about culture and the success for the businesses will come through communities or clans. Family metaphor is another version of this community or clan metaphors which are employed giving the impression as moving from cold bureaucracy to warm community/clan/family. It is also stated that family metaphor invokes pre-industrial romantic images of kinship bonding and shared struggles against adversity (Casey, 1999: 162). It is also mentioned that such a family image used for organizations are the model for paternalistic employee relations where the management can be thought as father and non managerial employees as the children (Legge, 1999: 253).

However, from a critical perspective such a family metaphor about culture also means normative control within organizations and in addition to its positive images it also has negative aspects such as hierarchy, patriarchy and repression (Ainsworth & Cox, 2003: 1456). The reality would be different as the family discourse is critically analyzed and the question is asked “who really benefit from that discourse?”.

Discourse is defined as a structured set of texts and practices which is produced, distributed and consumed by actors in a way which constructs objects and subjects in the social world (Fairclough, 1995). The analysis of discourses in organizations helps us covering different aspects of exploring the social production of organizational phenomena (Hardy, 2001). Regarding this study, it is stated that with a family metaphor a family discourse is created and therefore a family discourse is a set of language and practices employed in an organization in order to construct a social family-like atmosphere that is expected to be experienced by all the members. In order to understand what lies beneath of this discourse it is also important to know about critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA aims to analyze opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language, in other words CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse) (Wodak & Meyer, 2001: 2). One of the dimensions about CDA is discourse-as-discursive practice meaning that it is produced, circulated, distributed, consumed in the society. These processes are largely in terms of the circulation of concrete linguistic objects (specific texts or text-types that are produced, circulated, consumed, and so forth). Approaching discourse as discursive practice means that in analyzing vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure, attention should be given to speech acts, coherence, and intertextuality (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). These discursive practices may be also used as a disciplinary apparatus in which people are formed, modified, delimited, and controlled for the sake of institutional ends (Foucault, 1979). Accordingly, discursive discipline may be used by businesses in overt, codified disciplinary practices that are not formally pronounced or rationally determined (Casey, 1999: 158). In this study “family metaphor” is taken as a discursive practice that disciplines the work environment and the employees. Accordingly, the construction of a family feeling is produced, circulated, distributed and consumed in the businesses so that the reality and the difficulties of the business place is transformed into a different, emotional and affective structure.

With the help of the family metaphor a family discourse is created in the organization so that it is aimed that a different workplace is constructed where employees are not just working for a business, they are working for their families. The colleagues are not colleagues any more, they are a part of a huge family and superiors are somehow like fathers (or mothers). Besides, there should not be any conflict of interest since they are family and everybody in the firm should dedicate themselves for the sake of their organization-family. It is expected that there is willing service of long hours of work and declarations of commitment (Casey, 1999; 161). Who do not like working in such an intimate and emotionally supportive place? Even though it seems very inviting for many people, it should be asked who really benefits from being a family. Accordingly, with such a discourse it is very easy to get approval of employees for any kind of commitment and loyalty. Since you devote yourself for your family, it does not matter if your salaries are cut due to financial crisis, or it does not matter if you lose some benefits due to increase in compensation packages of your father-managers. Additionally, it is not just about the income or a benefit, by creating a family atmosphere business begins to shape your identity, forms a new subjective being and holds your citizenship so that you do not resist to situations against your ideas. Besides, such a constructed discourse helps creating a working atmosphere that employees work without any close direction and supervision. A naturally and instinctually family membership feeling forms and directs the employees. They all do their best for their businesses even if it steals many hours from the privacy of the employee and his/her "real" family. Besides, even there is something against the interests of the employee it is not expected that he/she shows cynicism, resistance or anger since he/she is in the "family". If one of the employees would inquire about the management policies or question about his/her manager's approach, he/she is very likely regarded as a betrayer by the colleagues.

As father and mother are the main directors of a family, managers have the role of directing and supervising the employees providing a basis for a paternalistic management. In such an organization, family discourse obviously supports paternalistic leaders who can easily manipulate and direct followers. Actually, such a leadership style would be very dangerous since such a leader easily create trust and make people follow him. It is very likely that people would be affected by an authority figure like a father in an organization but again it should be asked that who benefits really from such a situation. Paternalistic leaders may seem very useful for the businesses since they are capable of directing employees in a caring and benevolent way for the ultimate good of all the family members (employees). But they easily may cause the failure of the business or misuse of their power against the employees. The illusion of having great power over people may cause losing the principal ethical understanding as what is right or wrong. In family-like organizations this situation is very possible that conflicts are suppressed and paternalistic figures of the family-organization would be very powerful. With a family discourse through the paternalism the natural values of hierarchy with a caring management is asserted, the unity feeling against competition is shown and employees are kept in pursuit of managerially defined goals (Legge, 1995: 253). Accordingly, people assess the organizational reality from the perspective of a member of "the family" rather than from the perspective of a contractual worker that the consequences would be significantly unlike. For instance, unionization in a family would be strange (Boje, 1995, 1013). Besides, compliance or obedience to "the father" is expected whilst examining his authority is not.

Actually, this family discourse also challenges the idea of professionalism where the emotions and affective aspects are to be outside of the business. Accordingly, a professional perspective should focus on giving accurate and rational decisions where the decisions should not be based on emotions. In such a context, family discourse creates a dysfunctional family where the businesses become a “seemingly real family”. While it is aimed to create an affective and emotional attachment in the business, at the same time it is expected to be rational and professional that all these may cause a crisis of relation and belonging. Hence, business should be business and family should be family.

In such organizations spending time together has a great importance. By this way it is very possible to create a family atmosphere and that is why many organizations arrange social activities such as picnics, bowling tournaments and birthday parties very often. Therefore, even the employees would have some free time; they are also encouraged to attend such activities. All these activities are supportive events that improve the family feeling. Besides, these are all signs of creating a new ideology or culture for the employees as working for the family-organizations. As a hypothetical argument it can be stated that businesses are trying to be the family of the employees although it is a contradiction in terms. Businesses cannot be families since the reason of existence, the structure and the roles are completely different. Keeping in mind the official definitions of the family and the businesses it is not possible that they are congruent. But with a family discourse the business tries to pretend to be a family although the basic premise of a family and a business is completely different. As an intentional constructed entity organization lacks basic characteristics of a family such as kinship, family bonding and intimate relationships. Besides, all the HRM practices are against the nature of being a family. To be a family member you are interviewed, your skills are evaluated, periodically you are measured on the basis of your performance and you can be fired due to many reasons. Since you are regarded as a “resource” and as a kind of input it is easy for a business to change you. But, it is not even a matter of question for a family member to be fired or to be changed easily. Therefore, it is not possible that organization can take place of a family since “blood is thicker than water”. Even though it is very clear that family and business are obviously different and since businesses are not value-free or conflict-free places there comes the question that why such a discourse is often used.

Regarding all these arguments it can be stated that family discourse employed by the businesses is a disciplinary and controlling device that enable employee to comply, obey, identify and associate with the business. Besides, through the usage of the language and by creating a meaning, businesses have a basis for the manipulation of employees easily in order to have controlled, compliant and productive employees. By using the emotional aspect of being a family, employees’ emotional needs are embezzled and without being aware of such a situation, employees work for long hours willingly, spend less time for their privacy and family, have less likely opportunity to give voice against management policies and easily devote themselves for the sake of the organizational needs. Such a discourse legitimizes the domination and formative structure of the business over the every aspect of employees’ lives.

5. CONCLUSION

In businesses it is always a matter to keep employees in the track in order to attain the common aims of the business, meaning efficiency and effectiveness for a better profit margin. In order to

realize such an aim businesses have some common aspects coming from their nature of control and management. In this study one of the problematic sides of this control is analyzed via critical discourse analysis. It is aimed to demonstrate that with a language use the structural aspect of domination and control is built up. It is obvious that it is not possible to overcome the nature of the organizations made up of hierarchies, power-laden roles or formal structures. But it is very possible to figure out power, control and domination relations in an organization to understand the problematic nature of management coming from the abuse of organizational power so that people would be aware of it and may have the idea of changing it. Therefore, this critical management study aims to contribute to the idea of much democratic and not manipulated workplace where the emotional nature of human beings is not exploited.

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