

Organizations as meaning systems: time for clarity

Manuel Fernández-Ríos, Ramón Rico and Rafael San Martín
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

As a response to certain chronic weaknesses in organizational science, we propose a general theoretical alternative that will permit us to redefine our conception of organizations in terms of meaning systems. We discuss the theoretical underpinnings and the basic definitions involved in this approach, identifying the components of organizations and the relationships between them from a representational point of view. Finally, we also consider some implications of this approach for a series of relevant topics in the study of organizations.

La organización como sistema de significados. Como respuesta a determinadas deficiencias crónicas en la ciencia organizacional, proponemos una alternativa teórica que nos ofrezca una oportunidad para redefinir nuestra concepción de las organizaciones en términos de sistemas de significados. En el presente artículo estableceremos los antecedentes y las definiciones implicadas en esta aproximación e identificaremos desde un punto de vista representacional los componentes de dicho sistema y sus interrelaciones. Finalmente, consideraremos las implicaciones de esta aproximación para diferentes tópicos relevantes en el estudio de las organizaciones.

Organization theorists today face the same, or largely similar, problems as the pioneers of the science. It seems almost as if no significant scientific progress has been made, despite a wealth of research and publications. It is not the objective of this paper to illustrate these shortcomings of organization theory with specific examples. We may however, begin by asking ourselves some searching questions. How many different theories of formal organization currently exist? Which theories have been scientifically falsified and therefore definitively rejected? How can we approach the problems of organizational design and participation, or of strategic diagnosis in an objective manner? Which of the perspectives proposed by scholars in the field actually coincide?

As theorists, we might excuse ourselves on the grounds that the science of organizations is not, and therefore cannot be treated in the same way as, a natural science. Nevertheless, it would be more honest to accept that the field suffers from chronic theoretical weaknesses that lead us systematically into error. These pitfalls are apparent not so much in the propositions advanced by scholars as in the very formulation of the questions. Be that as it may, we shall resist the temptation to enter into a much-needed criticism of organizational theory, since this paper has a very different objective.

Our aim is to outline the necessary bases for building a general theoretical alternative in an attempt to develop our theoretical knowledge of the formal organization, in a way that allow a better understanding and explanation of this defining feature of our

society in scientific terms. This will involve considering how the phenomenon of organization manifests itself, describing its basic elements and the nature of their relationships, and explaining why we perceive organizations in the way we do.

The first of these three issues refers to the question of *how*, which must be answered in functional terms. The second and third issues refer to the question of *why*, and therefore require what epistemologists would define as an ontological explanation. The two are, of course, complementary, and together comprise what is understood by a scientific explanation, based on an objective description of the phenomenon and an understanding of the causes or principles underlying its objective structure.

We shall begin by demarcating the problem, then go on to explain and describe the organization as a meaning system and will conclude by illustrating some of the implications of this conception for the study of organizations.

Demarcation of the problem

Many scholars researching organizational phenomena have focused on describing the attributes presented by organizations, to some extent passing over the question of *why* organizations take certain forms, exhibit attributes other than those contemplated in pre-existing categories or function in a particular way. Argyris (1964) showed the way forward when he argued that it is essential to go beyond merely functional explanations, if we are to construct a model capable of providing valid and general schemas as a basis for understanding the real world.

«It should be clear», says Argyris (1964), «that in asking this question we have to climb to a higher order of abstraction to find the essential properties or characteristics of the concept of organization at any level of social life. In doing so, it is

necessary to emphasize that, in the following discussion, when we use the term organization, we are not referring to a specific plant, a government bureau, a school, or a trade union. We are referring to the abstract construct of organization.

The reason for climbing to the highest possible heights of abstraction is to see if we can discover any essential properties about the nature of organization that are true for any “real life” organization such as a plant, a bureau, or a trade union. If we do, we might be able to develop a model that is relevant to all of these different kinds of “firms”. This is not a new procedure in scientific thought –indeed, it is quite common. One of the eternal challenges facing any researcher is to climb up to the highest levels of abstraction and develop constructs that capture the essential properties of what he is studying. Then he returns to the empirical world to test, through research, whether these are indeed the essential properties. He realizes that it is too much to expect to succeed during the first trip. He knows that it will require many trips, each caused by, as well as guided by, the questions that are raised by this empirical research.

Why go to all this trouble? Because if the researcher succeeds in finding the necessary and sufficient concepts he will have developed a much more simple model of the causal factors than he can find if he remains close to empirical reality. If this model eventually enters the “elegant” class (that is, with the fewest possible concepts or constructs he is able to explain a large range of “real” problems), he then feels that he has helped to make a small contribution to the goal of valid and comprehensive schemes to understand the real world.» (Argyris, 1964: 148-149).

Rising to Argyris’ challenge to scale the heights of abstraction, we hold that an organization is above all a *meaning system*, and that, as such, it is neither immediately observable nor comparable to an objective, physical reality. Our proposition is thus that organizations are fundamentally subjective, while being formally objectifiable. Consequently, a researcher seeking to enter this world of meanings can only do so by interacting, either directly or indirectly, with holders of the specific organizational mindset. After all, meanings may differ, or even prove contradictory, between one organization and another.

We are not aware of any organization theorist who has really focused on such a conception of the organization. It would, for example, be uncontroversial to follow Weick’s definition of the organization as «a body of thoughts», or better still, his argument that an organization is «a system of shared meanings» or «a socially-constructed reality». However, we cannot accept such definitions because they fail to differentiate organizations sufficiently from other social entities and realities. In the last analysis, all social realities may be considered as socially constructed to some extent. Crucial differences therefore exist that must be pinpointed, even at the risk of taking our own conception of the organization into uncharted waters.

With this in mind, we shall formulate a proposal that not only answers the question of *why*, thus completing the scientific explanation of the organizational phenomenon, but also strips organization theory down in a simplification that is both positive and necessary. This proposal starts from the recognition that the organization is a meaning system, which can be put into practice, be objectified and become reified.

We propose recognizing the essential nature of organizations underlying any level of analysis following a line of argument that provides more consistent results than the approaches criticized above. We believe that it is necessary not only to observe organizational phenomena and provide an account of their interrelationships, but to transcend the phenomenological aspect of this reality in order to achieve the maximum possible degree of abstraction and generalization, without either understating or overstating the importance of economic or social outcomes.

The idea of the organization we propose is not entirely new and, indeed, has been implicitly present in scientific discussion for some time. Nevertheless, we feel that there is a need for this idea to be more clearly and explicitly conceptualized. This article is therefore an attempt to map, improve and extend the paths opened up by the great theorists such as Blumer and Weick, who conceived of the organization as a system of shared meanings or a socially-constructed reality.

Social psychology, sociology and recent contributions in the representational field of cognitive psychology and the study of social cognition provide a wealth of references. The social construction of reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1982; Fine, 1993) are perspectives that contain extraordinary insights into the contextual structures of social interaction, though the empirical consolidation and confirmation of the propositions advanced by these authors has been fraught with difficulty. Nor is the application of the social cognition approach to organizational issues (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Fiske, 1992) been problem free. Meindl, Stubbart and Porac’s sharp critique (1994) of conceptual confusion in descriptions of the different cognitive processes involved in organizations and the most appropriate level of analysis for research in this area is particularly relevant, while Spender and Eden (1998) take a gentler line, noting that the discipline is still in its infancy.

In our view, the existing literature on the processes by which we make sense of reality and share our insights with others, offers us an arena from we could explain the proposed theoretical framework.

The organization as a meaning system

Behind the assertion that the organization is a meaning system lies an unruly mob of unanswered questions. This is partly because the definition of «*meaning*» is so imprecise. Cognitive psychology postulates that meaning is captured at different levels, as a result of which various different types of representation have been proposed. On the one hand, we have concepts and schemas (frames, scripts, roles and implicit theories), and on the other the images and mental models that appear to emerge from working memory in response to the cognitive system’s computational needs.

Though it makes sense to consider meaning systems at the highest levels of abstraction, we must refer to representation in our descent to the operational plain. This is because representational concepts:

- 1) Enable us to describe how we store significant knowledge in an organized manner, thus providing powerful constructs with which to integrate the meaning system.
- 2) Offer a plausible understanding of the processes by which people make sense of events, thus increasing our ability to predict, explain and, consequently, manage their behavior patterns.

- 3) Emerge at a research level as formal structures forming the basis for studies aimed at increasing our understanding of organizational complexity.
- 4) Enable us to forge links with research in the flourishing field of sense making in organizations.

The last of these observations is particularly significant in view of Weick's comments (1995) concerning the theoretical gap resulting from the absence of a clear meaning creation paradigm, even though organizations are frequently described or explained in terms that lend a central role to meanings in the construction of both the organizational system itself and its immediate environment.

Though some scholars have made proposals that point in this direction, we consider that the present reformulation: (a) draws a clear distinction between the concept of formal organization and other social constructs and products; and (b) represents an advance in the understanding and explanation not only of the formal organization but also of related elements, such as design, strategy, communication, management, decision making, participation, leadership, change, innovation, motivation, effectiveness, profitability and development.

Concept and Nature of the Formal Organization

We have referred to the organization as a meaning system, rejecting conventional definitions precisely because meanings form the basic elements and relationships within the system. A formal organization is not its employees, its norms, the raw materials it transforms, the manufacturing processes it employs, its sales network, management team, or board of directors. It is not even all or most of these things. An organization is a set of meanings that are pertinent and relevant to attaining specific goals at a given time and in a given place. These meanings represent the many facets of the organization, and have different degrees of centrality within the system.

Because of this interdependence, the set of elements (meanings) must be referred to as a system. When the meaning system is sufficiently sophisticated, or fulfils a series of conditions, it becomes capable of transformation into an objective or operative organization. This is a somewhat separate issue, however, and we are not concerned here with explaining how the organization as meaning system is transformed into the organization as objective reality, or with the conditions of success and failure, effectiveness or profitability.

Before its emergence as an objective reality, that is, before it appears in the form of a workshop, factory or travel agency, the organization is conceived, thought out and planned by its designers in what constitutes a genuine act of creation. For this act to take place, however, a representational system is needed to frame mental models of objects, actions and possible goals. It is only after this process of mental construction that any artifact, be it a tool or an objective organization, can be developed and tested.

Human beings have engaged in this kind of activity ever since they gained the faculty for abstract thought, but the time now seems ripe for an improvement in the quality of the process, and perhaps the eradication of error. It is really a question of honing the process to the point where the desired outcome will be produced at the first attempt. This makes it necessary to consider the basic elements or components upon which the design should be based. Figuratively speaking, knowledge schemas make up the molecular level of the process. The combination of these basic

building blocks within the reasoning process should, in the right conditions, generate mental models that would be objectifiable as explicit organizations.

The use of these elements also enables us to link our proposed perspective to the contributions of those scholars who have taken the highly promising approach of analyzing organizational reality on the basis of schemas in order to understand not only how the members of an organization interact in the organizational context (Gioia, 1986; Harris, 1994; Weick, 1995), but also how they generate such a context (Weick, 1993; Porac, Thomas and Baden-Fuller, 1989). The contributions of these authors are in line with the conclusion reached by Markus and Zajonc (1985), who consider schemas as the most useful and complete perspective on social cognition mechanisms.

It is tempting to dismiss the innovation we propose as mere terminological sleight of hand. Nothing could be further from the truth. Basing our discourse on meanings implies going, and allows us to go, far beyond what has been achieved with traditional theories of organization. Indeed, what many theories treat as fundamental elements (e.g. a set of people) are no more than phenomenological accidents that contribute little or nothing to our understanding of the formal organization.

Conceptualizing the organization as a meaning system not only salvages our role as active constructors of organizational reality, but also throws light on how we interact with the eventual product. The dynamic interaction between the meaning system and the reality into which it is translated is no less important than each of these phenomena taken in isolation. It is in this area that the psycho-social aspect of the present theoretical framework becomes apparent.

Elements of the system

To speak in terms of a system implies referring to the elements of which it is constructed and the relationships between them. Following the approach suggested by Katz and Kahn (1978), Fernández-Ríos and Sánchez (1997) proposed in an earlier work that the basic components of any organizational meaning system are roles, norms and values. As we have already argued, however, we no longer believe that these components actually form the basic elements of the system, useful though they may be.

After describing different representational formats, we shall discuss how we would apply this alternative to integrate the roles, norms and values to which we have referred in earlier work into the meaning system. Let us note here, however, that the integration of these three elements takes place consecutively, with values coming last. This approach is perfectly compatible with the reformulation we shall present below.

The first of these elements, the role, has a direct reference in the role schema. Norms, defined as pre-established general expectations that must be fulfilled, would emerge within a script structuring the appropriate sequence of events in a given situation. Finally, values would correspond to what some authors (e.g. de Vega, 1984) have called general life aspect schemas, which condition the goals of individuals. Thus far, it seems clear that to treat meanings as a function of norms, values and roles according to our earlier perspective provides only a rather static account. There is, then, a need for elements that allow us to account for the knowledge associated with creative, innovative and novel activities, such as organizational design. There also seems to be a

need for elements that help us to understand the dynamics of the elements within the system.

Implicit theories and mental models allow us to progress a little further. First, implicit theories, which represent a synthesis of knowledge referring essentially to relations of cause and effect, allow us to provide explanations of organizational reality, as well as anticipating the actions required to obtain a given outcome. Implicit theories thus enrich the representational view of the organization insofar as they help to justify procedures at the macro level (e.g. team-based design of an organization), the meso level (e.g. implementation of a participatory leadership program) and the micro level (e.g. the individual decision making process).

Mental models by their very nature form part of working memory and, therefore, of *on-line* processing. Such models help us to understand the changes undergone by the previous set of representational structures, their development and their increasing complexity. The static elements of long-term memory provide only a partial account of the manner in which we resolve new problems and extreme situations that cannot be dealt with by means of automatic processing (e.g. firing an employee or changing company strategy, etc.). Faced with such situations, we in fact activate mental models that guide us through the tasks at hand, because the mental processing required to reduce ambiguity, a feature common to all problem solving and creative activities, obliges us to transcend the knowledge stored long term in our existing schemas.

Clearly, this point is of great importance to the dynamics of the system and the relationships between its elements, which are the subject of the next section.

Relationships between elements of the system

Let us now consider some of the properties of schemas and mental models with a view to describing the relationships between these elements of the system.

As we have explained above, working exclusively at a conceptual level blocks our view of how people actually construct more complex knowledge. We shall therefore make use of schemas for the purposes of this discussion. Relationships between different types of schema and between schemas and concepts, are defined by inclusiveness. Thus, a schema may be made up of different sub-schemas.

It is therefore not unusual to find that scripts group role schemas and frames together and that these in turn include other conceptual networks themselves comprising basic schemas. For example, the script «going to see the boss» is articulated in terms of a temporal sequence of actions directed towards a goal —arriving at the secretary's office, introducing oneself, going into the boss's office, sitting down, etc. This script itself contains role schemas for the secretary, the boss and oneself as series of variables encapsulating our expectations about the goals and actions of the people involved. It also possesses frames or series of schemas related to the configuration of space in the boss's office, as well as concepts such as «problem», «sales» or «effectiveness», which may be grouped into further basic schemas.

Considering implicit theories as high-level syntheses, we find that they include a wealth of concepts and schemas organized around specific knowledge domains. Implicit theories simplify knowledge by establishing one-way causal relationships between

elements. This has the effect of stifling the potential for multivariable relationships and cutting recursive loops. The nature of the relationships created and the attempt to derive causal from co-variation relationships, may account for some of the more striking properties of implicit theories, such as their self-fulfilling nature and imperviousness to change.

Finally, let us consider mental models. These are generated when knowledge which arises from other more stable representations (schemas), proves inadequate in a given situation.

Mental models emerge from the activation of partial elements drawn from different schemas in combination with reasoning and thought processes to create a meaningful whole in response to the demands of the system. Their genesis is thus of a relational nature. Any knowledge derived from the activation of mental models that may be of use in understanding or explaining future events is finally integrated into schemas stored long-term.

In this light, we suggest that mental models are linked to other representational units via a fuzzy nexus. The economy of the cognitive system, however, retards activation unless the interaction between the individual and the situation demands some modification to processes in response to a perceived change in circumstances. This proposition covers Hellgren and Löwstedt's (1998) requirements with regard to stability and change in mental structures in response to prevailing conditions. It also explains why we systematically fall into the attribution fundamental error (Ross & Nisbett, 1991). When someone does us a bad turn, we do not normally activate a mental model to try and understand what happened but rather attribute the situation in dispositional terms based on generic role schemas.

This whole set of interwoven elements and relationships thus lends the system its characteristic properties.

Properties of the system

Describing something involves clearly differentiating between what it is and what it is not. In the present case, this «something» is a meaning system. Bearing in mind that numerous different meaning systems exist (languages, music, political ideologies, etc.) and that not all organizations are formal, describing such a meaning system implies drawing a distinction between those systems that are formal organizations (and therefore underpin and make possible formally organized human behavior) and those that are not. The minimum defining characteristics of organizational meaning systems would include the following:

1. *Holism*. The meaning system that supports any organization is an eminently holistic gestalt, its components being more properly understood through their interrelationship within the system than by considering their accidental properties in isolation. When we represent a set of meanings through a conceptual network, the number and quality of the connections between concepts affect interpretation, thereby altering the significance of the system.
2. *Artificiality*. The system is essentially artificial. Its component elements (i.e. cognitions) and their relationships are identified, selected and integrated rationally for a given purpose, usually with reference to other systems.
3. *Instrumentality*. The system is conceived as a resource for achieving certain objectives. The elements of the system represent the means to reach a desired goal. The creation of the system is thus absolutely intentional, even if its

validity remains untested until it is translated into an objective reality.

4. *Limited complexity and dimension.* An organization is a complex system with limited dimension. Complexity refers not only to the number of elements in the system, but also to the relationships between them. As explained in the preceding section, such relationships may be recursive and involve multiple variables. The number of relationships established in the system provides some idea of its dimensions, which are ultimately constrained only by our overall cognitive capacity.
5. *Coherence.* The system must be coherent both internally and with regard to external factors. Such internal and external coherence is a consequence of the web of complementary relationships that binds together the system's basic elements. On the one hand, this accounts for the integration of the elements of the system itself and, on the other, for its interaction with other systems.
6. *Quasi-equilibrium.* The system must remain in a state of relative stability. Such quasi-equilibrium is a product of a strongly Lewinian conception of change, in which the meaning system is in constant tension. This explains why minor alterations may have major consequences while big changes produce little or no effect.
7. *Convertibility.* It is a property of the meaning system underlying organizations to be convertible into objective reality. This results in a specific organizational configuration, which may or may not be effective for a given mission and must be tested in practice. Spender (1998) posits the existence of knowledge that is contextualized and absorbed in practice and which, unlike abstract knowledge, cannot be separated from activity. The quality of such knowledge only becomes apparent in action.
8. *Shareability.* The meaning system is inherently shareable. This does not, however, imply that it must necessarily be shared, but only that it will be if sharing is a necessary part of the process of transforming the organization into an objective reality or is essential for it to function. The need for sharing may also be a built-in design feature of organizational meaning systems.
9. *Equifinality.* The system has the quality of equifinality. This means that infinite acceptable routes may exist to transform the meaning system into an objective reality or, indeed, to convert realities into elements of a meaning system. Thus, different organizations may exist for the same purpose, while the same organizational configuration may be applied in pursuit of varying goals.
10. *Temporal depth.* The meaning system has a certain temporal depth. This implies that the meaning systems underlying organizations cannot arise in a vacuum and are never complete. Thus, the meaning system is constantly created and recreated in an ongoing process involving a logical and ordered combination of past knowledge and experience, present needs and capabilities and future expectations. In our view, temporal depth conditions the origin and end of the meaning system in such a way that it becomes blurred and confused with the personal vicissitudes of its holders. The objective origin and end of a «real world» organization is therefore much easier to verify.

Let us now move on from the consideration of the cognitive and psycho-social aspects of the organization as a meaning system to address a question which must be asked by any scholar proposing an alternative approach in the field of organizational studies. What, if anything, does the proposed new perspective add to our existing knowledge of formal organizations and organizational phenomena. Clearly, it would go far beyond the intended scope of this paper to discuss all current approaches to organizational theory. Nevertheless, we do wish briefly to review some areas of the study of organizations with a view to possible avenues for future research into organizational phenomena based on the perspective presented here.

What does the conception of the organization as a meaning system contribute to the principal areas of the study of organizations?

In general terms, this approach provides an integrated conception of the organization that is sorely needed. Many authors have lamented the excessive profusion of short and medium-range theories, which block a more holistic view of organizational phenomena (Mintzberg, 1991).

The symbolic background of this theoretical framework does not, in our view, mean that it is any less applicable to the «objective» world of everyday company life. Indeed, by relating one area to the other, we are able to make room for theoretical propositions in the area of meaning that treat human activity in organizations as an input/output continuum, in which behavior objectifies understanding of external information. Such objectification facilitates the generation shared interpretations within a group of people (Weick, 1979; Porac, Thomas and Baden-Fuller, 1989; Mckinley, Zhao & Rust, 2000).

Perhaps the salient contribution of the framework presented here is that it opens up alternative ways forward in organization theory without giving up our existing store of knowledge. Rather, it represents a step towards understanding organizational phenomena, which opens up further avenues for progress. With this in mind, this section will briefly consider some of the main areas of the study of organizations following the logical path from the individual to the group and finally to the organizational level.

At the individual level, we would like to draw the reader's attention to organizational commitment and the willingness of individuals to accept the organization's initiatives. These phenomena have significant implications for motivation and are the products of representational processes.

Highly visible, irrevocable and intentional actions by decision makers tend to bolster the personal commitment of other members of the organization to those directly concerned (Weick, 1995; Cialdini, 1993), and hence to the actions of the whole organization. The perspective we propose permits us to reinterpret the two basic dimensions of organizational commitment referred to in the literature, normative (attitudinal) commitment and compliance (calculative) commitment, as a meaning construction process, as Harris (1994) proposes. Normative commitment is a product of similarities between the schemas that guide the individual's actions and those provided by the organization. These similarities generate a feeling of «usness» that promotes and sustains commitment. Compliance commitment, on the other hand, arises from the resolution of conflict between different schemas in favor of those provided by the organization, whether to avoid punishment or to obtain an expected reward.

We may address people's willingness to accept the organization's initiatives in light of the contributions made by Dutton and Dukerich (1991) concerning the individual's motives for obeying or rejecting such initiatives. These authors argue that the identity and image of the organization combined with the individual's sense of identity and expectations constrain and shape his/her interpretation of events and subsequent actions. The members of an organization will generally opt to direct their actions in the manner they believe to be most consistent with its perceived essence, and will actively try to manipulate others' impressions of the nature of the organization to present a positive image.

At a group level, the leadership role can be reinterpreted as an essential element in the construction of meanings in the organization. Given the position usually occupied by leaders, they have the power to act as points of reference—a mirror reflecting the shifting organizational context. This idea is far from new. Scholars such as Pfeffer (1981), Pondy, Frost, Morgan and Dandridge (1983), and Poole, Gioia and Gray (1989) have already described how symbolic processes enable leaders to direct the members of their organizations towards desired forms of understanding and action. By using the concept of the meaning system to represent all organizations, we gain an insight into how the leader's premeditated intention may trigger undesired effects, and why inaction is also meaningful (Greenberg, 1995). It even permits us to explain the absence of any need for leadership in situations where the meaning system driving a given activity does not support such a role.

Far from being a kind of mindset warden, we understand that the leader's true role is to place his/her resources at the service of the group in the interest of making sense of a given reality. It is not a question of mass-producing similar minds, but rather of generating a kind of cognitive scaffolding that the organization's members can climb while retaining sufficient freedom of thought and action to be able to attribute outcomes to will rather than force of circumstances.

To link up with the phenomenon of power in organizations, we should remind ourselves that cognitive structures in an organization are often the result of vested interests (Mumby, 1988). Consequently, certain groups will develop meaning systems that endeavor to maintain the *status quo* or generate advantageous change.

Our proposal reduces the question of conflict to a problem of differences between meaning systems. As Pfeffer (1981) points out, conflict arises from a lack of agreement concerning causal relationships and preferred outcomes. This does not mean that perfect agreement must reign among all members of an organization. Indeed, it may be as noxious as complete disharmony in terms of organizational survival. Disagreement has its own powerful dynamics. It is the key to the creative tension that drives progress. Because of this, we believe that limited agreement is only essential in certain elements of the system, while some disagreement may be necessary in many others.

This view explains conflict resolution as a process that elicits the representations underlying certain approaches and tries to reconcile the differences, rather than as a «zero sum game» which fails to address the underlying problems or produce lasting solutions.

At an organizational level, it may be illustrative to consider the impact of our proposal on the study of culture, design and strategy. As far as strategy is concerned, this perspective explains why we react rather to our representation of the context than to the underlying reality. Such contextual representations are constructed through an active process in combination with positions and

choices that give rise to the appearance of certain keys (Weick, 1995). The interpretation of these keys and their meaning affects the representations held by strategic decision makers, paving the way for subsequent strategic choices. Thus, from the strategic point of view, the most interesting aspect is not thought in isolation, but rather the interaction between thought and action established over time (Lindell, Melin, Gahmberg, Hellqvist and Melander, 1998). This perspective can be linked to Greeve and Taylor's findings (2000) from their study of innovation, cognition and strategic action, as well as to the proposition advanced by Porac, Thomas and Baden-Fuller (1989) that decision makers use inductive reasoning processes to construct a schema of the competitive environment. Such schemas involve at least two main classes of belief: a) those related to the company, competitors and clients; and b) causal beliefs about the actions required to compete successfully in a given environment.

Discussion of organizational design from the perspective proposed here allows us to understand it as a process by which meaning systems are transposed into reality systems. The design of organizations is an activity that involves applying a set of schemas forming part of our, more or less intuitive, knowledge of the most appropriate sequence of actions to obtain a given outcome. This appreciation of design makes explicit the conclusion reached by Ford and Hegarty (1984) and Lewin and Stephens (1993) that the apparent result of a design process rests on a magma of cognitions that condition the final outcome.

We believe the framework proposed in this paper integrates recent approximations to the organizational design process and opens the way to further advances in our knowledge both of this area and of certain associated organizational phenomena along the lines of the schema-based perspective proposed by McKinley, Zhao and Rust (2000) to show how organizational downsizing has become institutionalized.

With regard to the headway made in the matter of organizational design, let us first consider Weick's proposition (1993) that the design process is improvisational and involves a basic problem of aligning a sufficient number of meanings to permit coordinated action. The process is thus based on the perception of sequences of action with favorable outcomes, concentration on those sequences, labeling, repetition and eventual dissemination of the procedures established. Secondly, we may mention a recent work (Rico and Fernández-Ríos, 2002) in which organizational design is treated as a dual process involving a feedback loop. The first of these processes is essentially creative and consists of framing an explicit or implicit blueprint setting out sequences of action that are intentionally directed towards achieving a goal, while the second is operational and involves the transformation or reification of the project.

Finally, the perspective we propose allows for reinterpretation of the fundamental elements of organizational culture as proposed by some scholars (e.g., Schein, 1985) in terms of schemas. Thus, Harris (1994) proposes explaining both socialization and the processes involved in cultural maintenance and evolution in representational terms, an approach which is particularly relevant here.

In this paper we have tried to sketch the implications of the organization-as-meaning-system framework for a limited group of topics relevant to the study of organizations. While we believe that our proposed perspective will permit progress towards a better understanding of the complex phenomenon that is the organization, new questions and issues will undoubtedly emerge in due course.

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