"THE SOCIAL DESTRUCTION OF BEAUTY
ORGANISATIONAL CONFLICT AS
SOCIAL DRAMA"

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The Social Destruction of Reality:  
Organizational Conflict as Social Drama

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Rival coalitions have incentives to try to overturn accepted organizational orthodoxies by proffering alternative constructions of reality. According to the social drama approach, the interpretation of conflict events can be framed by the protagonists within four distinct genres: comedy, tragedy, melodrama, and irony. A social drama is initiated by a breach of norms, and is concluded by ceremonies of separation or integration. During the social drama, coalitions compete to impose their preferred stories on events.
There has been a constant attempt to tear down management, to disparage everything the company has tried to do....Today, this isn't a strike, it's a battle of good vs. evil. Frank Lorenzo, CEO, Eastern Air Lines. ("Labor's," 1989, p. 21)

Lorenzo's battle with the machinists, said Bryan, was "the purest case of evil vs. good." Charles Bryan, leader of the striking Machinists union. ("Eastern," 1989, p.46)

People construct the worlds in which they live, building on previous fabrications offered by their cultures, organizations, families, and experiences. The concept of the social construction of reality has become increasingly important to both the theoreticians of social science (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984), and the methodologists (e.g., Fiske & Shweder, 1986). Within organizational theory, both the institutional school (see Scott, 1987, for a review) and the enactment perspective (Weick, 1979) have taken social constructionism as a starting point from which to analyze phenomena as diverse as utility regulation (Ritti & Silver, 1986) and the enactment of speculative bubbles (Abolafia & Kilduff, 1988).

From the institutional and enactment perspectives, organizations embody sets of taken-for-granted assumptions that are transmitted from generation to generation of role occupants (cf. Zucker, 1977; Weick & Gilfillan, 1971). Left unstudied, however, has been the social destruction of reality, the process by which one group deliberately and systematically seeks to undermine the legitimacy of another group’s taken-for-granted assumptions. Concrete social privileges accrue to groups that succeed in impressing their definitions of
reality upon society (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 118). For this very reason, rival coalitions are likely to try to overturn accepted orthodoxies by proffering alternative realities. It is this process of interpretive conflict that the present paper analyzes as social drama, defined as the framing and enactment of conflict events in terms of familiar story prototypes.

In the case of the battle between the unions and management of Eastern Air Lines in 1989, the quotations at the beginning of the article illustrate how each side tried to paint the other as the embodiment of evil in an on-going melodrama. A consultant had earlier advised the union to caricature Eastern's CEO as the "pillager of the American Dream" with union members filling the roles of "fathers and mothers, people just like you and your neighbors" ("Labor's," 1989, p. 20).

According to the social drama approach, the interpretation of conflict events, such as the Eastern strike, can be framed by the protagonists within genres of drama such as melodrama, tragedy, comedy, and irony (see Table 1). These broad generic classifications have been used by literary theorists (e.g., Frye, 1957), historical scholars (e.g., White, 1973), and social scientists (e.g., Kilduff, 1986; Wagner-Pacifici, 1986) to encompass a range of possible story-types that are readily available to consumers of folk-tales, literature, television dramas, plays, and movies. People's stories about on-going conflicts tend to be variations of the generic prototypes with which they are familiar. The use of such prototypical
stories as the fall of the hero, or the crusade against evil, to interpret and guide action may serve important individual and organizational interests. As Hirsch (1986) has suggested, the grounding of conflicts in genres of drama: a) reduces the unnerving to the familiar; b) provides participants with clearly delineated roles; c) ritualizes and contains violent emotions; and d) facilitates the evaluation of heroes and villains.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Comedy, as a generic frame, involves a challenge to the old guard by the unconventional ideas of the young hero, who goes on to build a new society (Frye, 1957, p. 157). (This definition, like that of the other genres, derives from literary critical theory, and differs from popular usage.) Entrepreneurs, seeking to legitimate radical proposals that violate taken-for-granted business truths, often have recourse to a comedic frame, portraying themselves as renegades who will shake up the industry and rebuild it in their own image. This frame is also popular with corporate raiders who promise vigorous new leadership in place of the moribund policies of the target managements they seek to replace.

The melodramatic frame involves a polarization of the protagonists into those on the side of good and those on the side of evil. Crusading social organizations, such as the Temperance movement, often frame their struggle as a holy war against corruption
and vice. By framing events within this genre, the protagonist anticipates a series of adventures ending in one climactic battle in which the opposition will be defeated (Frye, 1957, p. 189). For example, the strikers against Eastern Air Lines portrayed themselves as engaged in one of a series of battles against the evil forces that were trying to destroy the labor movement ("Suicide," 1989, p. 18).

In contrast to the melodramatic frame, which can be used to deny the humanity of one's adversaries, the use of a tragic frame is an explicit recognition of the human fraility of the protagonist. The tragic frame focuses on the tragic hero, who is pitched from the top of the wheel of fortune into danger and humiliation (Frye, 1957, p. 207). This frame places much of the blame for the predicament of the hero on fate rather than on personal responsibility, and is therefore popular with embattled managements facing impending disaster. For example, Lee Iacocca's campaign for federal loan guarantees to save Chrysler Corporation emphasized that the company had been "driven into the ground" by the "relentless lash of more and more government regulation" (Iacocca, 1985, p. 205). This tragic framing, focusing on the fateful and unanticipated effects of government regulation, was effective in eliciting sympathy for the plight of a huge company facing bankruptcy.

The ironic frame is used to discredit one's enemies, who may have tried to impose comedic or melodramatic frames on their actions. In irony, heroes are exposed as fools and knaves (Frye, 1957, p. 223). By interpreting apparently heroic actions as part of a scam to fleece
a gullible public, the romantic facade that has hidden corruption or incompetence from view can be stripped away.

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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These genres of social drama describe a range of possible themes that protagonists can discover and impose on events. But how is social drama initiated, how does it develop, and in what ways is it concluded? In order to identify a conflict as a social drama, and as a way of separating the flow of events into conceptual categories for the purpose of analysis, a four phase model has been developed (see Figure 1). All genres of social drama can be modelled in terms of the following four phases: 1) a public breach of crucial social norms leading to 2) mounting crisis, and 3) attempts at redressive action that culminate in 4) ceremonies of reconciliation or separation (Turner, 1974). In the complex and high speed world of modern organizations, the crisis and redressive action phases may overlap, or the process may cycle backwards as attempts at redressive action repeatedly fail. Temporary reconciliations between the protagonists may fracture into renewed enmity. Social dramas rarely run smoothly in the sense of neatly following a particular linear sequence (Turner, 1980, p. 152).

From the perspective adopted in this paper, the breach of social norms that initiates social drama is a socially constructed reality rather than an objective fact. There is always enough ambiguity about
social interaction to allow any particular action to be labelled acceptable or unacceptable. The declaration by a group that crucial norms have been breached may be a tactical ploy in a strategic game rather than simply a spontaneous outburst of indignation. For example, the management of Walt Disney Productions considered framing the 1984 hostile takeover bid by raider Saul Steinberg in melodramatic terms as the attempted rape and pillage of a beloved American institution by a "corporate visigoth" (Taylor, 1987, p. 79). This response would have helped foment a crusade for the hearts and minds of all the Americans who cherished Disney as the personification of the American spirit. The Disney management decided that such a crusade would not influence the institutions which held the majority of Disney shares (Taylor, 1987, pp. 122-123). To prevent the hostile takeover, they felt compelled to pay Steinberg's company $31.7 million as a "greenmail" premium for his shares.

Unfortunately for the Disney management, the Wall Street community of speculators, investors, and raiders had become convinced by Steinberg's framing of the Disney social drama as a comedic challenge with himself as a possible hero. Steinberg promised to revitalize the performance of what Wall Street insiders considered to be poorly-managed assets. Steinberg argued that the unacceptable breach of norms was not his hostile takeover bid, but the decision by Disney management to dilute the value of existing Disney shares by issuing new stock to hastily acquire a property development company and a greetings card company. Ironically, Disney's attempt to defend
itself from possible takeover by reducing the percentage of shares owned by Steinberg's company, gave Steinberg the perfect excuse to finally launch the takeover bid. He claimed that he "had to move" because Disney management would keep on diluting the values of shares held by existing shareholders "forever and ever" (Taylor, 1987, p. 114). Steinberg's version of the social drama has been widely accepted by management gurus, who portray him as "an outstanding example of the useful role raiders play in identifying underperforming companies and forcing changes which improve their performance" (Taylor, 1987, p. 246).

As the Disney takeover example shows, social drama is generally initiated by attempts at revolutionary rather than incremental change. The challenge to the established order is public rather than private, and is waged with rhetoric, symbols, and spectacle, as well as with more tangible resources. For example, the strike at Eastern Air Lines has been described as a case where "symbolism was far more important than economics for all parties concerned" ("Suicide," 1989, p. 18).

According to the four phase model, organizations can be thrown into crisis following attacks on their taken-for-granted assumptions. Coalitions of competing interests may be exposed as the threatened leadership seeks for redressive actions to limit the spread of the crisis. At the level of symbolic action, these redressive actions can include reiterated appeals for support of values central to the audience of consumers, shareholders, citizens, employees, suppliers, and other stakeholders. Thus, in pressing for legislative action to
prevent the transfer of management control, a target of a hostile takeover may invoke the dangers the raider presents to the long-term welfare of the community and the employees. In one case the embattled management succeeded in obtaining a court order which annulled the raiders' voting rights on the grounds that their activities were "socially unacceptable" (Wagstyl, 1988). Similarly, a government may react to a terrorist challenge with urgent calls for the defense of democracy (cf. Wagner-Pacifici, 1986). Finally, in the last act of social drama, ceremonies of reconciliation or separation are enacted and the villains and heroes decisively labelled.

Within any of the stages of social drama, any one of the generic frames can be invoked by the protagonists (see Figure 1). Indeed, much of the interpretive conflict involves the battle by different disputants to impose different frames on events. Protagonists may try to stage actions in accordance with their preferred interpretive frame. As the one-way arrow in Figure 1 suggests, generic frames can help direct action. Facing unexpected developments, protagonists may also shift from one generic frame to another, in an attempt to find a story that better fits the data. The ease with which protagonists can switch frames may well depend on the intensity and duration of the previous role play, as Mills (1963, p. 445) has suggested: "The long acting out of a role, with its appropriate motives, will often induce a man to become what at first he merely sought to appear."

Unlike staged performance, social drama is an ad-hoc affair, in which the different actors may be trying to enact different scripts
for the benefit of quite different audiences. The simultaneous framing of events in terms of different genres by conflicting coalitions gives social drama much of its chaotic and sensational character. Clearly, initiators of social drama will tend to characterize themselves as challengers (comedy) or crusaders (melodrama), whereas those under attack are likely to have recourse to all four dramatic frames, including blaming fate for their predicaments (tragedy), and trying to discredit myths proffered by the other side (irony).

This paper draws together many diverse strands of scholarly activity from psychology, anthropology, sociology, and literary theory to forge the social drama approach to organizational analysis. The aim is to stimulate theoretical discussion and empirical research. The remainder of the paper is organized into five sections. First, we discuss the relationship of the social drama approach to other perspectives on conflict. Second, we review the basic psychological assumptions of the social drama approach. Third, we outline how the approach can be used to analyze organizational behavior. Fourth, we present an agenda of empirical research that could elaborate many of the ideas presented here. Finally, we discuss the policy implications of the social drama approach.

Social Drama and Other Approaches to Conflict

From a social drama perspective, the destruction of old norms in a society undergoing rapid change is only one element in the generation of social conflict (see Gurr, 1968, for an alternative view). As resource mobilization theory has suggested, organizational
conflict grows out of the struggle for power among well-defined groups (Tilly, Tilly, & Tilly, 1975, p. 7). There is always enough discontent in any society or organization to sustain an effectively organized movement supported by some members of an established elite (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Social movement organizations, such as the Temperance movement, develop because they successfully garner resources within the political system (Gusfield, 1963).

Social drama analysis involves the study of both pageantry and underlying power distributions. The emphasis is on the imaginative energies of organizational coalitions, their semiotic capacity to enact ceremonies that legitimate their interpretations of events in conflict situations. This emphasis stands in sharp contrast to much of the current literature in interorganizational relations, for example, which has been accused of virtually ignoring conflict in favor of analyses of routine failures of cooperation (DiStefano, 1984).

The social drama approach includes impression management as one aspect of the stage management of interpretive conflict (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986). But the social drama approach extends the dramaturgical metaphor beyond the routine games of strategic interaction described so insightfully by Goffman (1959). If dramaturgy is concerned with the enactment of everyday routines, social drama is concerned with the breaking of routine and the ensuing consequences. Social drama begins when routines are breached, and escalates through the opportunistic use of narrative framing and theatrical gesture.
The battle is to control the interpretation of events and to legitimate social constructions that have been rudely challenged. Thus a social drama analysis can deal with spectacular disruptions of routine such as the 1981 strike by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers that quickly escalated from a labor dispute to a symbolic battle between an elected presidency and union power (Shostak & Skocik, 1986).

The social drama perspective is similar to political economy approaches to organizational analysis (e.g., Benson, 1975; Zeitz, 1980) in making the assumption that structural change is a "ubiquitous and constituent element of social structure" (Dahrendorf, 1959, p. 132), and in its focus on the struggle for domination and power. Social drama is different from political economy approaches in its emphasis on the symbolism of action, its preoccupation with spectacle, and its inclusion of conflicts triggered by attacks from outside the interorganizational network, from, for example, a corporate raider or a terrorist group.

In summary, the social drama approach differs in three important ways from other possible perspectives on organizational conflict. First, the social drama approach focuses on how mutually opposed coalitions attack each other's legitimacy, rather than on how cooperative partners remedy problems of coordination. Second, social drama shifts attention from the objective nature of conflict events to how those events are interpreted, and how such interpretations constrain subsequent enactments. Third, social drama offers a
narrative theory of conflict processes derived from cultural anthropology, cognitive psychology, and literary theory, that can enrich game theoretic or other normative models of decision making in conflict situations. Social drama is concerned with how imaginative energies are expended to impose meaning on ambiguous events, rather than with how individuals choose among an array of well-defined options.

Psychological Assumptions of a Social Drama Analysis

Social drama analysis proceeds on the basis of one overriding assumption: that individuals seek to stage-manage events and to interpret actions in terms of familiar story structures. Reality construction, from this perspective, involves drawing upon the store of socially shared dramatic archetypes to simplify and explain complex and ambiguous evidence in the service of strategic goals. Psychoanalytic theory has long maintained that individuals unconsciously replicate such archetypal stories as the Oedipus myth (Freud, 1922). The social drama claim goes a step further in suggesting that individuals can be aware of a connection between the enactment and its narrative parallel.

There is some evidence from social drama research to support the connection between narrative structure and the actions of protagonists. For example, an analysis of the events following the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, the Italian statesman, by the Red Brigades terrorist organization, concluded: "That the Moro affair protagonists were conscious of and working with the dramatic progress of the event
is patently clear" (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986, p. 232). Similarly, the
conflict between Henry II, King of England, and Thomas Becket, head of
the English church, has been analyzed as a recreation of Christ's
Passion stage-managed by Becket, with Becket himself in the starring
role of martyr (Turner, 1974).

The interdependent relationship between social drama and
narrative forms is not restricted to political action, however. As
cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (1986, p. 42) has recently
stated: "Businessmen and bankers today (like men of affairs of all
ages) guide their decisions by...stories...These narratives, once
acted out, 'make' events and 'make' history." According to the social
drama perspective, people faced with threats to their social
constructions, draw upon a large repertoire of remembered stories in
order to frame events. As Sarbin (1984, p. 32) has commented:
"Dramatistic scripts are patterned after half-remembered folktales,
myths, legends, and other stories. Not taught and learned in any
systematic way, the plots of these stories are absorbed as part of
one's enculturation."

There is considerable research evidence in cognitive psychology
showing that people can acquire story structures through experience
with listening to or reading stories (see Mandler, 1987, for a
review). These story structures are powerful cognitive frames: people
tend to recall irregularly arranged stories in "canonical form rather
than in the form in which they were presented" (Mandler, 1987, p. 2).
In other words, if a story is missing part of the structure that makes
for "storyness," people will tend to remember the story as containing the missing part. Similarly, people will simplify complex testimony by weaving a story to explain the extended sequence of events (Read, 1987). Such stories facilitate attributions and judgments concerning blame in conflict situations (Pennington & Hastie, 1986). In summary, the research from cognitive psychology indicates that people do have story models in their heads and will impose these models on incomplete and ambiguous data, much as the social drama approach suggests. The question remains: are people aware of using story models to guide attributions and behavior?

Field research in anthropology has shown that people self-consciously use tribal myths as guides to behavior (see the discussion in Wilkins, 1983, p. 83). Similarly, in organizations stories are often created by management for the explicit purpose of controlling the behavior of employees. For example, at Hewlett-Packhard "stories emphasize and legitimate the management philosophy" (Wilkins, 1983, pp. 81-82). The same stories are used by many different organizations, however, with each organization claiming its version to be unique (Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983). This false uniqueness phenomenon is compatible with the idea of a common origin for such stories in a myth central to the culture at large. Indeed, a study of one organization showed that a sense-making myth was consciously adopted by the staff from a traditional fairy tale to simplify a confusing interorganizational conflict and to justify action against the organization's leader (Smith & Simmons, 1983). The
finding that participants in social dramas such as hostile takeovers deliberately borrow myths and dramatic language from the surrounding culture of books, movies, legends, and video games has also been extensively documented by Hirsch (1986; Hirsch & Andrews, 1983).

In summary, there is evidence that people impose story structures on ambiguous and complex data; that they self-consciously use stories to guide their own and other people's behavior; and that they adopt well-known cultural stories to make sense of and facilitate action in situations such as hostile takeovers in which the framework of taken-for-granted assumptions is under attack.

Social Drama and Organizational Behavior

In the modern world, in which resources, power, status, and privilege increasingly adhere to individuals primarily as members of organizations, battles over the legitimacy of social constructions often take the form of conflicts between organizations. For example, the fight by rural American Protestants to prevent their way of life from being undermined by the arrival of new immigrant groups was transformed into a conflict between organizations for and against prohibition (Gusfield, 1963). Even in a context supposedly free of organizational influences, such as the futures markets, an analysis of crisis revealed that coalitions of organizations cooperated to change the sacrosanct principles of free trade in order to protect the interests of member firms against the innovative practices of outsiders (Abolafia & Kilduff, 1988).
In organizational societies, social dramas are enacted on public stages such as those provided by the courtroom, the mass media, and the stock market. The drama is sustained through support from an off-stage cast of lawyers, bankers, and public officials. The public struggles between organizations form themselves into narrative texts that can be analyzed like literary texts (cf. Ricoeur, 1971). The four phase model developed by Turner (1974) concentrates research attention on such specific aspects of social texts as the breach of norms, the crisis, the redressive action, and the reconciliation or separation. Cutting across these categories are the generic frames that guide the rhetorical and symbolical strategies that organizational protagonists use to appeal to the audience of consumers, investors, electors, and other important publics, both institutional and individual.

Social drama between organizations is often enacted as a public spectacle that captures the attention of a whole society. The events surrounding the kidnapping and subsequent murder of the Italian statesman Aldo Moro are an example of how sustained stagecraft throughout all phases of the drama transformed a personal tragedy into a melodramatic triumph of democracy (Wagner-Pacifici, 1986). The leaders of organizations at the center of Italian politics used their political dominance to frame the events during each phase of the drama in terms of one genre rather than another, thus confirming the observation that, "He who has the bigger stick has the better chance of imposing his definitions of reality" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 108).
The Moro social drama, like most organizational social dramas, involved a struggle to define the nature of reality through symbolic resources, such as rhetoric and ceremony, and material resources, such as wealth. The protagonists offered polarized perceptions to the Italian people through the electronic and print media, with each side in the drama defining the other as the embodiment of evil (cf. Gusfield, 1963, chapter 4). The melodramatic framing of events led the political parties and their terrorist opponents into a villain-victim rendition of events that precluded negotiation or compromise.

Whereas a national crisis of the dimensions of the Moro affair is a form of political social drama, the hostile takeover is a form of corporate social drama. A recent sociological account of the inception, popularization, and eventual routinization of the hostile takeover focused on the surprisingly dramatic language used by participants and observers of this contemporary social invention. The members of organizations involved in hostile takeovers used such dramatic scenarios as the Wild West, medieval chivalry, and Star Wars to frame their social constructions of events (Hirsch, 1986).

The public fascination with the spectacle of corporate giants fighting with each other became intensified as the status of the corporations increased, and as the corporations became relatively closely matched in terms of status (cf. Geertz, 1973, p. 441). Like the cockfight in Bali, the hostile takeover became a form of deep play, an arena in which such fundamental concerns as esteem, honor, dignity, and respect were enacted (cf. Geertz, 1973, p. 433). Chief
executives found their status threatened and the continued existence of their firms in peril. As the earlier example of Saul Steinberg's bid for Disney suggested, hostile takeovers can involve a war of the genres, with raiders typically casting themselves as comedic heroes challenging the incompetent old-guard, while the incumbent management portray themselves as melodramatic defenders of virtue and taken-for-granted values.

The examples of organized terrorism and hostile takeovers have shown that interorganizational social drama involves people as members of organizations battling to control the interpretations placed on events. These interpretations are framed in dramatic language that justifies the polarization of perceptions of the protagonists. The repetition of a particular kind of social drama (such as the hostile takeover) can lead to a routinization of conflict, however, as societal norms shift to accept what had been considered outrageous breaches of expected behavior. Interorganizational social drama, then, involves new and unexpected attacks by one organization on the taken-for-granted assumptions of another organization.

Social dramas are not an exclusively interorganizational phenomenon, however. Within organizations, coalitions also fight to control the social engineering of privilege and the distribution of prestige. Social drama research can be used to analyze the critical incidents that shape an organization's development over time (e.g., Pettigrew, 1979), and can also illuminate the complex dynamics of
publicly staged conflict in organizations (e.g., Kunda, forthcoming; Rosen, 1988).

The life course of an organization is fractured by break-points such as leader succession, technological discontinuity, and structural transformation (Morgan, 1988; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). At these break points, the taken-for-granted assumptions normally transmitted from generation to generation are often disrupted. Coalitions compete to implement alternative social constructions favorable to their own preferred outcomes. Social drama erupts as old fiefdoms are challenged by radical innovations. At one company, university trained programmers in casual clothes worked irregular hours to implement a revolutionary new inventory control technology. Their arrival in the organization breached so many existing norms that "many...employees...never got over the experience" (Pettigrew, 1973, p. 85).

As a result of the breaches of norms, the organization was thrown into crisis, during which old conflicts between groups were reignited, and new ones generated. Each side in the dispute developed explanations justifying its own intransigence in the on-going struggle and derogating the opposing combatants. For example, the inventory control staff refused to accept data produced by these "long-haired highly paid yobos" (Pettigrew, 1973, p. 87). The programmers, for their part, referred to the stock controllers as "idiots" (p. 87). The confrontation was only settled with the departure of the programmers, and the reinterpretation by the stock controllers of the
significance of the new technology in terms of status elevation rather
than reduction.

Such dramas of interpretive confrontation may be less frequent in
passive organizations or highly bureaucratic government agencies
(Clark, 1972, p. 180) than in organizations in turbulent environments.
For organizations that must "love chaos" (Peters, 1987) and discredit
past behaviors (Weick, 1979) in order to maintain flexibility, social
dramas with their attendant conflicts, confusions, and high
emotionality, tend to become routine aspects of organizational life,
with a consequent toll in terms of employee stress, turnover, and
burnout (Kunda, forthcoming).

Elaborating the Social Drama Model: A Research Agenda

Psychological Studies

The psychology of social drama is still relatively unexplored,
despite increasing attention from cognitive psychologists to the
importance of story processing schemas (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Sarbin,
1986). Most cognitive science research has treated stories as abstract
structures that link bits of information together (e.g., Pennington &
Hastie, 1986). There is a need therefore for laboratory studies that
go beyond the information processing paradigm to study the connection
between story structures and the repertoire of narrative forms with
which people are familiar.

The research showing that people structure events after
remembered stories offers a foundation for further work directly
testing the relationship between narrative structures and interpretive
outcomes. Future work should explore the idea that people try to influence the interpretation of events in conflict situations by biasing the data in the form of one genre of drama rather than another, as melodrama rather than tragedy for example. This generic biasing can be expected where the protagonists to a dispute have a stake in convincing an audience to support a particular version of ambiguous events. Such biasing can be expected even though people in general are not familiar with the technical differences between different genres. All that is required is that people base their interpretive strategies on particular story prototypes. In a similar fashion, people have been shown to utilize the ancient Greek theory of the correspondance between four elements and four temperaments even though they have no knowledge of the specific details of this theory (Martindale & Martindale, 1988).

Before embarking on studies of generic biasing, the utility of the four-fold classification of social dramas introduced in this paper must be verified. Do people reproduce these genres in accounts of their organizational conflicts? Are there stories that fall outside these genres? To answer these questions might require simulating a variety of interpretive conflicts between and within organizations, and then examining accounts of such conflicts to see what genres were being employed.

Studies of generic biasing would start with the hypothesis that different generic frames would produce different attributions and judgments concerning the protagonists. In other words, the
experimenter could systematically vary the frame within which the accounts of interpretive conflict were presented. Subjects would be asked to take the role of Chief Executive Officer of an organization involved in a social drama. That the same events can mean different things depending on the context in which they are displayed is well established (Kahneman & Tversky, 1984). The proposed research would go further and examine the effects of genres of drama on judgments.

Finally, the questions raised by Hirsch (1986) concerning the cognitive functions of generic framing require extensive research that builds upon the program outlined above and other hints in the decision making literature. That story structures in general simplify complex decision making has been shown by Pennington and Hastie (1986). Dramatic frames, with their built in roles for villains and heroes, may be particularly effective in clarifying judgments in conflict situations. In particular, point of view may be critical: compared to observers, the actual participants in the dispute can be expected to make more use of dramatic framing to justify their behavior.

Sociological Studies

Laboratory studies are necessary to verify the cognitive assumptions and predictions of the social drama approach. But as a framework for the analysis of how people in organizations strive to destroy the legitimacy of competing social constructions, the approach demands field studies of on-going social iramas. Hirsch's (1986) work is exemplary here in showing how linguistic analysis can uncover categories of generic framing. The basic questions which field
studies of interpretive conflict in organizations need to answer are three. First, what methods do coalitions in organizations use to undermine the consensual interpretations of other coalitions? Second, how is the management of interpretations achieved? Third, how adaptable are dramatic frames to changing circumstances?

Answering the first question requires either participant-observer studies of social dramas in progress (e.g., Pettigrew, 1973; 1979) or post hoc analyses of themes and symbols produced by participants (e.g., Wagner-Pacifici, 1986). The different protagonists in the dispute can be expected to present stories that differ markedly with respect to both genre and role because the ways in which events are presented can determine audience response. For example, whether the audience responds to a case of union busting in terms of the just defeat of an evil cause (melodrama) or the destruction of a proud and noble organization (tragedy) may depend on which genre guides their interpretation of events, and which groups are assigned the roles of villain and hero (cf. Shostak & Skocik, 1986). In the theater, the genre organizes the emotional and rhetorical displays: a comedy stimulates much different actor and audience response than a tragedy. Similarly with regard to social drama, the hypothesis is that different generic frames can provoke quite different imaginative involvements by the human participants.

The second question concerns how the leaders of organizations seek to impose their own dramatic frames on events. Close analyses of codes (Barley, 1983), language (Hirsch, 1986), texts (Kets de Vries &
Miller, 1987), and symbolic action (Kunda, forthcoming) can reveal how dramatic scripts are enacted. Little is known about the relationship between symbolic management and the enactment of particular plots. Turner (1980) has suggested a recursive relationship exists, such that explicitly theatrical "stage business" structures the social drama as it is enacted, whereas plays, films, and novels help to legitimate the success of the winners of the drama after it has ended: "Just to be in the cast of a narrated drama which comes to taken as exemplary or paradigmatic is some assurance of social immortality" (1980, p. 155).

Analyses of communication networks can reveal the channels through which social constructions are shaped, and whether, for example, friends help support each other's constructions of reality (cf Krackhardt & Kilduff, forthcoming). In the case of the hostile takeover bid for Walt Disney Productions, there is some evidence that the Disney management lost the battle to determine the way the social drama was framed on Wall Street because of their lack of social connections. Unlike Saul Steinberg, the Disney team were outside the dense network of professional takeover specialists: "Wall Street was an alien arena for most of the company's officers, who were in the business of running theme parks and making movies for children" (Taylor, 1987, p. x). Network analyses can also help clarify the role of top management in symbolic communication, and whether attributions of management efficacy are themselves dramatic fictions (cf. Meindl, Ehrlich, & Dukerich, 1985).
Policy Implications

The social drama perspective suggests that narrative structures are powerful tools for both explaining why events happened and providing complex advice about the future (cf. Kaplan, 1986). Such narrative tools are especially appropriate when the normal functioning of the organization is disrupted by unique contingencies (Krieger, 1986). The impression management of alarming events may be more important in terms of swaying public opinion than the nature of the events themselves. A hostile takeover is likely to succeed if the raider can project the impression that a comedic shake-up of the old guard is long overdue. The takeover is likely to fail if the incumbent management can frame events in terms of a melodramatic battle between righteous defenders and rapacious villains. In order to resist being assigned roles in some other protagonist’s enactment, managers, union leaders, and other organizational strategists may need to become adept at formulating policies within overall generic frames.

The audience for social drama includes not only investors, consumers, other organizations, and the general public, but also the members of the embattled organization. By placing threatening events within a dramatic frame, leaders can help unite and motivate organizational members faced with the breach of norms, crisis, redressive action and separation/reconciliation sequence. As Pfeffer (1981, p. 34) has pointed out: "Symbolic action may serve to motivate individuals within the organization and to mobilize persons both within and outside the organization to take action." Leaders can
reaffirm their leadership role by providing individuals with a guiding interpretation of both past and anticipated events.

The ability of top management, political leaders, or union officials to control the development of social drama can be overstated, however. The powerful forces that the dramatic framing of events can unleash may not respond to interpretive manipulations. Social drama has a momentum of its own that results from the dynamic interaction of competing ideologies. Although leaders can try to impose interpretations on the flow of events, there is no guarantee that these interpretations will succeed. Further, if the leadership of an organizational coalition does succeed in framing events in terms of an archetypal battle between good and evil, for example, there is the risk that the resulting increased commitment to a conflict may be damaging to the organization (cf. Martin & Powers, 1983, p. 104). The initiation of crisis situations can lead to outcomes neither anticipated nor welcomed by even the most powerful participants (Abolafia & Kilduff, 1988).

Conclusion

In this paper we have taken an approach to conflict rooted in symbolic anthropology (e.g., Geertz, 1980; Turner, 1974) and applied it to understanding the social destruction of shared realities in organizations. We have focused on how organizational coalitions use theatrical framing to control interpretations of events, and to undermine the legitimacy of taken-for-granted assumptions. Several recent sociological studies of hostile takeovers, organized terrorism,
and the battle for prohibition, indicate the pervasiveness of dramatic language, staging, and polarization in organizational conflicts.

The social drama approach rests not only on the observations of anthropologists and sociologists, however, but also on psychological assumptions concerning the way people structure actions after remembered stories. Existing research strongly supports the link between narrative structures, perception, and behavior. Such research offers a foundation for further work concerning the psychological and sociological implications of social drama.

In conclusion, the collision between socially constructed organizational worlds can result in an escalating interpretive conflict, featuring heroes and villains whose battles resonate with dramatic implications. To the extent that institutionalized realities are real in their consequences, organizational coalitions can be expected to use rhetorical strategies and dramatic framing to prevent the delegitimation of even the most patently inaccurate social constructions. Human beings may prefer to act in their own stories even if other groups have better tales to tell.
References


and Social Psychology, 52, 288-302.


Table 1

The Four Genres of Social Drama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENRE</th>
<th>TYPICAL PLOT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMEDY:</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial renegade challenges old guard by breaking taken-for-granted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Challenge</td>
<td>assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MELODRAMA:</td>
<td>Target of hostile takeover vilifies the raider as the personification of evil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Crusade</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRAGEDY:</td>
<td>Uncontrollable circumstances bring company to bankruptcy despite best efforts of CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Downfall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRONY:</td>
<td>The people's champion, who promised to reform a corrupt industry, is exposed as a crook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1

The Phases and Genres of Social Drama

ACTION PHASES

Breach → Crisis → Redress → Separation/Integration

INTERPRETIVE FRAMES

Comedy / Melodrama / Tragedy / Irony
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