Exploring Folk Art

Michael Jones

Published by Utah State University Press
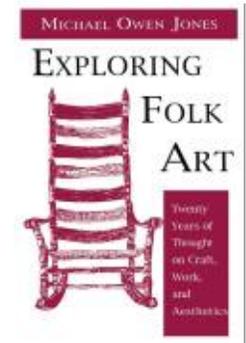
➡ For additional information about this book

https://muse.jhu.edu/book/9263

Preaching What We Practice:
Pedagogical Techniques Regarding the
Analysis of Objects in Organizations

"If one direction is inward to the isolated self, then another direction is outward to the communal other. More than entailing a concern for groups—ethnic, occupational, or regional—the communal other is organizational. It exists in different organizations of social structure," writes Simon J. Bronner (1986:125). "The broader implication of *organization* was its vision of society," continues Bronner, "much as performance and function provided their own. . . . In a modern society that was noted for its increasing individualism, institutional settings define more identities: the office, the military, the city, the media, the school, the profession, the government. More cultural associations are voluntary and overlapping" (Bronner 1986:126).

Bronner concludes his book on intellectual currents in American folklore study by writing that "the organizational current is not the only investigation that is suited to problems of folklore, but it moves to the fore because it proposes to reveal what is of most concern in a future-oriented society—the present state of the modern world and its guiding structures for the future." Moreover, "as folklore studies increasingly moves outside the academy, as it becomes more subject to organizational differentiation, and as it lodges in governmental agencies, foundations, corporations, museums, and libraries, then the keyword *organization* may balloon into a prominent theory of folklore studies" (Bronner 1986:128).

A new field of study requires time to develop. Concepts need clarification, assumptions must be considered, and questions for research have to be articulated. During the early stages, ideas might be expressed and developed less in articles and books and more in working papers, conferences, reports and reviews of conferences, and even correspondence. So it has been with the field of organizational ethnography (see, for example, McCarl 1984b; Jones 1985b).

The concepts of "culture" and "symbols" (traditional, expressive forms or "folklore") were not used in any meaningful way or with particular significance in the

literature on management and organizational science until the late 1970s. "Organization" and "organizational folklore" entered the lexicon of folklore studies in 1983 as a logical extension of some of the implications and ramifications of occupational folklife research of the preceding decade. In addition to papers being given at special conferences or at the annual meetings of professional societies, numerous works are being readied for publication.

Questions arise not only about the nature of such a field of study but also about ways to instruct students in carrying out organizational ethnography. In the mid-1970s I published papers on pedagogy, including (with Kenneth L. Ketner) "Folkloristic Research as a Pedagogical Tool in Introductory Classes" (1975) and "Films for Finals" (1976c). More recently, I was asked to contribute to *Art in a Democracy,* edited by Doug Blandy and Kristin Congdon. Because the book is to be published by the Teachers College Press and is intended for art educators, I wrote about "Making Work Art and Art Work: The Aesthetic Impulse in Organizations and Education." I also prepared "In Search of Meaning: Using Qualitative Methods in Research and Application," an essay to be included in a volume I am coediting. And a longer version of the article appearing below, called "Objects and Organizations: Material Culture Study at Work," will be published in the proceedings of the recent conference North American Material Culture Research: New Objectives, New Theories, jointly sponsored by the Winterthur Museum and Memorial University of Newfoundland, and directed by Gerald L. Pocius, who is editing the volume.

In recent years I have given courses on occupational folklore, applied folklore (focusing on medical research, museum work, and/or public sector folklife), and organizational folklore. Students are of varied backgrounds; they include folklore and ethnic arts majors but also those majoring in economics, industrial relations, arts management, human resources, and behavioral and organizational science. Often I have required students to carry out field studies (although the quarter system imposes some constraints not suffered by those who are on the semester system). To facilitate this, I have developed internships at a variety of organizations: companies in electronics, communications, home products, and health care; not-for-profit corporations including universities, churches, and government agencies; and also organizations that are not incorporated. Some of the internships carry a stipend; most do not.

Although perhaps desirable for certain purposes, it is not necessary for a course to be on a semester system or for students to carry out extended research projects. When she was a teaching assistant, for example, Susan Scheiberg (B.A. in folklore from Indiana University, and M.A. in folklore and mythology from UCLA), who is now in the Ph.D. program in folklore at UCLA, brought her students in an introductory American folklore class to the teaching assistants' office in our suite. Her purpose was to show the students examples of the teaching assistants' personalization of the office both outside and inside—including her own decoration of the area around her desk. Susan Scheiberg had students analyze what they saw and speculate about possible motivations and meanings.

In the paper below, I describe several techniques that I have used in classes on folk art and organizational folklore. The purposes of using these pedagogical

techniques are explained in the essay, which I gave at the American Folklore Society meeting in 1986. In some classes, the techniques prepared students to do field studies; in others, the techniques had different purposes. In the longer version of this essay, I consider not only pedagogical techniques but also the processes by which we make inferences from objects in an organization.

*   *   *

Although symbolic behavior abounds in organizations, we know less about it than we do folklore in other social settings. Are these forms expressive of values, attitudes, and opinions? If so, what do they express, to whom, and under what conditions? If they are not consciously intended to be symbolic, are they nevertheless "read" by people as clues to what the organization is, how members should behave, and why things are done the way they are? What, in sum, does organizational folklore study reveal about human behavior generally and about ways of doing things in particular organizations?

I address these and similar questions in a seminar on organizational folklore. To do so, and to teach observational and analytical skills to students, I employ a variety of methods. One is to show videotapes of a general manager and a president at work. Another is to distribute for examination printed materials given by firms to employees. Others include role playing and projective techniques.

In this paper, I describe such classroom exercises and pedagogical devices on the assumption that they might be useful to others who teach students how to identify, document, and interpret symbolic behavior in organizational settings.

Identifying Expressive Forms

Among the dozen courses I give, one is on organizational culture and another concerns folk art and technology. In the first class meeting of both I usually show two videotapes. One tape concerns a day with Fred Henderson, general manager of the Western Division of Xerox Corporation (Kotter 1981a, 1979). The other tape's subject is Renn Zaphiropoulos, president of Versatec, the world's largest producer of electrostatic printers and plotters (Kotter 1981b, 1980). The only introduction I give is to point out that neither tape isolates and identifies folklore but that both tapes might nevertheless be of interest to folklorists.

As we view the tape of Henderson, we see from his desk calendar that the day he was filmed began early and was given over to preparing for an awards ceremony that night honoring the division's sales people. Henderson, in a dark three-piece suit and white shirt, is shown in an expensively appointed conference room discussing in detail with his subordinates the agenda and

some of the sales facts and figures to be presented. He asks others their opinion of a film to be shown that night, which is intended to inspire sales personnel but which Henderson insists might not be as good as the previous year's. He commandeers someone's office to pursue the matter in private conference with one of his staff. At the end of the film, we see Henderson beginning his speech to the assembled sales personnel, perhaps less tense than earlier but no less "intense."

By contrast, Zaphiropoulos had nothing pending on his schedule, and jokingly admitted it; this is a "typical" day, he said. Dressed in a blue shirt and red tie without coat, he was seen wandering through the offices and plant—"managing by walking around"—kidding with secretaries and workers, commenting on the aesthetics of a poster that a staff member designed (and admonishing him not to distribute memos urging people to work harder), talking with a colleague about the coming holiday celebrations and vacations, dictating a letter regarding the mission of the company, and philosophizing to new employees at an orientation meeting. The company motto—"Be Bold!"—is often in evidence.

After showing the videotapes, I ask students a series of questions the answers to which are not given in the visual materials. For example, I list a dozen or more strengths cited by employees on other occasions (and summarized in a booklet accompanying the videotapes), asking students whether the individual described as "strong-willed," "competitive," "well-organized," "tough-minded," "precise," and so on is Henderson or Zaphiropoulos. Most correctly say Henderson. All agree that the person described as "very personable," one who "tends to be protective of the underdog," "a very strong person," and so on is Zaphiropoulos.

I also list several weaknesses according to the men's peers and subordinates. Students correctly identify Zaphiropoulos as the individual who "can be an optimist always, though sometimes I wish he were more of a realist" and "can be too forgiving at times." They agree unanimously that Henderson is the one about whom others said he is "too intense," he does "not delegate enough," and he "manages conflict by being very confrontational."

When I read memos by each man, students identify Henderson as the author of the one with turns of phrase such as "our key challenge," "accountability and demonstrated leadership," and "competitive and cost effective environment." They correctly attribute to Zaphiropoulos the authorship of a memo referring to his view of management as "an art," to his thinking of himself "as a gardener, as an arranger, as a creator of climate," and to his notion of managing as a process of helping people "grow."

"A plaque hangs in each man's office," I tell students. "In whose office will we find the one that reads 'Excellence is a state of mind'? In whose office

is the plaque that says 'Do not follow where the path may lead. Go instead where there is no path and leave a trail'?" The students are correct: the first plaque mentioned is in Henderson's office, the second is in Zaphiropoulos's.

"Which man's office is likely to have numerous photos of his wife, children, and boat; to have many signs and pictures; and to appear somewhat 'cluttered'?" I ask. "Zaphiropoulos!" they respond. "Whose office is best described as 'modern', 'tasteful', uncluttered?" The answer is obvious.

Having seen only a few minutes of videotape of each man at work, the students are able to attribute to him the strengths and weaknesses articulated by others, identify which person wrote which memo, predict which plaques will appeal to which individual, and ascertain without ever having seen them the way in which the offices are decorated. How?

In the discussion that ensues, it becomes apparent to students that their inferences are based on certain expressive forms and communicative processes they have perceived, to objects and the ways in which they are used, to physical settings, and to the social environment that affects and is affected by the tangible surroundings. Dress and appearance, the décor and appointments of rooms, language, ritual interaction, ceremonies, joking, festive events, storytelling: these and other forms and processes in everyday life, captured on a few minutes of videotape (without conscious effort to do so), provide the cues for understanding behavior, inferring values and concerns, and predicting actions. Words, actions, and things: all are capable of conveying meaning, or may be responded to as meaningful.

Interpreting Documents

In order to put students in a course on organizational folklore into the shoes of new employees, and also to begin to prepare them for doing fieldwork, I distribute materials that several firms give to those recently hired. These items include, variously, company newsletters, an employee newsletter, promotional or commemorative publications, and/or handbooks containing rules and regulations or guides to behavior in the organization. We consider each company in turn. Without telling them so, I begin with a company not historically preoccupied with its employees' welfare and end with one many of whose members proclaim it to be "people-oriented."

I say little by way of introduction to the materials, only noting that here are some items distributed to newly hired employees. After students have examined a firm's newsletters and other documents, I ask them a series of questions, including the following:

Is there a sense of the organization's core mission or ultimate function in society? What does the organization seem to value?

Is there an appreciation of the history, ethos, and uniqueness of the organization, and of individuals' contributions to it?

Are interaction and communication in the organization likely to be principally through a status system that maintains role boundaries, a hierarchy of authority, and strictly defined lines of communication? Or is the organization probably more equalitarian in nature, with open communication and participatory decision making?

Are people likely to be trusted, and treated as "adults"?

Will individual achievement be recognized—often and informally as well as on formal occasions?

Is the work environment likely to be competitive or cooperative?

Are organization participants likely to remark on the meaningfulness of their experiences, fellowship they feel with others, and personal satisfaction they enjoy at work; or are they more likely to complain about the lack of respect, rewards, or caring?

Do you want to work for this company?

One item, for example, is a full-color 8½-by-11-inch booklet identified as the firm's 1981 review for employees. There is much to respond to, note, and analyze in its 48 pages. For the moment I will mention only a couple of features.

There are numerous graphs and charts. To many of us, statistics and graphs are "cold, hard facts." They are certainly precise, succinct, and highly logical and rational; they do not evoke feelings of warmth, sociability, the free reign of imagination, or play.

For the most part, the drawings and photos are of company products. If people are shown with the products or in labs, they occupy only a small section of the frame, thus seeming to be subordinated in importance to technology. The few full-page photos of people depict vice presidents apparently visiting their respective divisions.

Students perceive the deference to titles and status, the dependence on hierarchy and a vertical chain of command, and the lack of public recognition of and attention to individuals who are not corporate officers. Reference throughout the booklet to "the Company" with a capital "C" seems to reinforce an image of the organization as an entity in its own right that is beyond the capability of anyone to affect it. Some students notice that in a photo near the end of the booklet of the company "team"—depicting what presumably is a representative sampling of lower-level employees—the 15 individuals are not interacting with one another but are walking en masse,

each independent of the other; the fact that they are *leaving* the premises is sometimes remarked upon for what it implies.

To some extent, overall impressions are confirmed by on-site research that has been done by others. Stories about the founder emphasize his penchant for secrecy, obsession with control, and manipulation of others. He is remembered as a technological genius in quest of engineering perfection who had little time for people. There is not much celebration in evidence in some areas, or festive feeling.

But there is also a cycle of stories about a third generation leader evincing a very different set of themes. This man is portrayed as sympathetic to employees, understanding, and concerned: something of a father figure rather than a trickster, like the founder. And certainly many individuals derive a degree of personal satisfaction in what they do and from their work group; one lab, in particular, is marked by great camaraderie. Moreover, many of the mid-managers and their superiors express a desire to change the organization. The booklet's reference to an opinion survey in 1981, "first in Company history," was indeed a step in the direction of ascertaining what the concerns and expectations of organization members are.

Through this exercise of examining materials from *both* organizations that are not particularly noted for their people-orientation and those that are, students begin to consciously consider the importance to organizational participants of recognition and rewards, meaningfulness, fellowship, and personal satisfaction. They gain greater appreciation of how and why they make the inferences they do. They also begin to realize that first impressions, though important and telling as hypotheses, are not sufficient; understanding complex situations requires amassing more information, bringing to bear more concepts, and examining circumstances in increasingly greater detail.

Inventories, Observations, and Projective Techniques

No one object or a few individuals' behavior represents the whole of an organization. We have to consider how objects are used variously by different people, ways in which they are altered or manipulated, when they are emphasized and by whom and for what reasons, and how they are reacted to on varied occasions. We must appreciate that there are contradictions between what people say and what they do or what the material culture over which they have control communicates. We must realize, too, that not everything is intended to be expressive—although nearly everything is capable of being interpreted by someone some time—and that what is expressed may correspond to reality or it may be a projection.

To teach these concepts, I take students in small groups to nearby offices to observe and compile inventories. They note especially how chairs are

arranged at or near desks, what information is publicly posted on walls or bulletin boards and how the materials are arranged and displayed, and ways in which people personalize their space with cartoons, photographs, slogans, and posters. They compare one office with another in the same unit; sometimes I have them compare their own records and interpretations with one another.

I have also had people draw maps of their units. One can assume that familiarity breeds accuracy; one's own work space and other areas one frequently uses are well in mind, their general dimensions and their relationships to each other clear. But some objects or spaces are rendered larger or smaller than is in fact the case, or they are drawn with attributes they do not possess. One person whose office is noisy to distraction drew the walls very thick—a matter of wishful thinking.

Summary and Conclusions

Of course, students in the seminar on organizational folklore also read and discuss Bell's "Tending Bar at Brown's: Occupational Role as Artistic Performance" (1976), Dandridge's "Organizational Symbolism: A Topic to Expand Organizational Analysis" (1980), McCarl's "Describing the Critical Center: Approaching Work Cultures from an Applied Ethnographic Perspective" (1979), and other articles and papers on organizational folklore and occupational folklife.

The purpose of these and other pedagogical techniques is to help students develop skills at isolating, documenting, and interpreting material culture and expressive behavior at work. The process of instruction also helps students understand their own behavior. In addition, attention to data from and about particular organizations results in the students appreciating more fully the nature and concept of "organization" generally. They realize, for example, that "organization" has its structural, formal, rule-oriented dimension; and they appreciate that "organizing" is a fundamental human endeavor and need, one that evokes expectations of meaningfulness, fellowship, and personal satisfaction as people cooperate and communicate to carry out common goals and objectives.

In conclusion, I would note that every organizational participant functions in terms of two models—the first, the experience of and assumptions about the rule-driven "formal organization," and the second, the experience of and expectations generated by the informal or "spontaneous organization" and of "organizing" as a phenomenon frequent in everyday life. The study of expressive behavior in organizations can lead to a fuller understanding of both aspects of organization, reveal participants' expectations of and about the

particular organizations of which they are members, and perhaps generate inferences about how to design, manage, or change organizations so that they fulfill their mission and participants' expectations.

Given the pervasiveness of organizations in our lives, there is much organizational folklore to study. And there are compelling reasons to do this research—precisely because organizations *are* so pervasive, serving as a work place for most of us and in other ways affecting our lives for good or ill.