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Forrest Gump's Contribution to Research Methodology: An Analogy for Organizational Culture and Some Musings on How to Write about Comparisons

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Abstract: When the fictional character Forrest Gump said: “Life is like a box of chocolates,” he offered an intriguing insight into at least one aspect of human existence. However, in creating his analogy he likely fell into a trap that sometimes ensnares social science researchers. For example, since the 1950s authors in disparate academic and professional genres have used metaphors/analogies to better understand organizational culture and create imagery encapsulating its key components. However, this essay argues that this genre is not always associated with methodological rigor. Problems include: metaphors/analogies are often employed without associated rationale; and, authors define their object of analysis in overly broad ways and/or fail to specify an agenda. This article explores these limitations in their historical context and offers a strategy for remedying them, a strategy with implications for scholarly written communication. Identified problems and a proposed solution are somewhat generic and are therefore relevant wherever analogies are used.

Key words: culture, organizational culture, analogy, metaphor, written communication, research methods, comparisons

Introduction

In the story of the same name, *Forrest Gump* reminded us that life is like a box of chocolates. He could have picked other analogies to illuminate what life is like and how its components interact. For example, he could have said that life is like a symphony orchestra practicing before a concert. He could have said that it is like a runaway shopping cart. Alternatively, he could have said that

it is like a game of snakes and ladders. Each of these alternatives would have perhaps been, in various ways, compelling and revealing.

The fact that *Forrest* chose a tangible and well-known product as an analogy to enhance understanding of a broad, somewhat abstract, and often arbitrarily defined idea draws attention to methodological problems which beset research using analogies/metaphors and, in particular, those addressing organizational culture. Three kinds of concerns stand out – concerns that have a special import for those seeking to improve their skill with written communication and stand-out as being able to wrestle (in writing) in a sophisticated way with abstraction and the ethereal.

First, analogies/metaphors are often used without adequately defining the abstract idea that they are intended to illuminate. A working (operational) definition of the target construct should precede choice of a metaphor/analogy because definitions differentiate between ideas and limit the scope of an object of analysis. For example, in the case of life, it appears that *Forrest* was indicating that human beings make choices and may be either disappointed or pleasantly surprised by the consequences of their decisions. Hence, *Forrest* was perhaps focusing on one aspect of life; the freewill aspect. He may have been suggesting that freewill – the purposeful choosing of a chocolate – is inevitably associated with uncertain consequences; you are never sure what you are going to get. If *Forrest* had been focusing on a physiological aspect of life, for example respiration, it would have been difficult to see the relevance of a box of chocolates. However, *Forrest* did not say what he meant by life and did not delimit the notion's scope.

Second, analogies/metaphors are arbitrary. Why choose a box of chocolates and not, say, a runaway shopping cart to indicate what life is like? A methodologically defensible answer to this question seems elusive. One possible response is that the way humans behave *vis-à-vis* chocolates more vividly depicts the relationship between, say, decision-making and its consequences than the way a shopping cart behaves *vis-à-vis* a non-flat parking lot; but perhaps only insofar as *Forrest Gump* is concerned.

Third, analogies/metaphors may be chosen to promote non-scholarly agendas. They may be invoked to either deepen understanding or to promote

commitment to an ideology or course of action. For example, *Forrest* could have been genuinely highlighting that a salient and important feature of human existence is that individuals inevitably make choices which will have either unpleasant or serendipitous consequences. The average of results from these decisions controls certain profound elements of an individual's destiny. On the other hand, *Forrest* could have just been encouraging positive thinking. After all, chocolates mostly taste nice even if some are better than others. *Forrest* was not explicit about his agenda when he compared life to chocolates and it remains unclear whether he was acting as a philosopher or counsellor when he offered his analogy/metaphor.

The remainder of this article focuses on organizational culture as an object of interest. In scholarly literature, this topic has often been the target of analogies/metaphors and the idea of comparison has become integral to qualitative methodologies examining the subject.¹ However, within this *corpus* research rigor is weak by conventional social science standards. In developing this theme, this essay will argue that analogies/metaphors are typically offered with limited or inadequately defended rationale. They are often used without a precise definition of the target object of analysis and may be associated with undisclosed agendas and/or those which are not intended to promote understanding. The article highlights these problems in their context and proposes a methodology for remedying them; a methodology with implications for writing generally about comparisons. Although it began by stressing *Forrest Gump's* legacy, it respectfully acknowledges the descriptive and evocative upside of previous work addressing organizational culture and draws attention to these strengths. Indeed, the mission of this paper is to present a methodology which retains advantages of established methods but which overcomes technical problems arising from use of those methods.

¹ In fact, analogies/metaphors are used to aid understanding of a range of related phenomena. For example, Martin and Frost (1996) used an analogy with a war connotation to describe exchanges between students of organizational culture, "the top-of-the-hill battle." A decade later, they replaced this analogy with "conversation" (Martin et al., 2006).

An outcome of this exercise will be a new take on social science research methodology, and on writing about social science.

By way of preamble, for purposes of this work, whilst the analogy/metaphor (fuzzy) distinction is not focal for understanding, some preliminary comments about these terms are provided. Specifically, according to Gentner (1983, p. 156), who was arguably the first to attempt to systematically delineate the constructs and (when considered alongside others who have written on the subject such as Leatherdale (1974), Cohen (1993), Oswick et al. (2002), Aubusson et al. (2006), and Plantin (2011)) had a special interest in definitions, an analogy is “an assertion that the relational structure that normally applies to one domain can be applied in another domain.” As a subclass of analogy, she elsewhere (Gentner, 1982) proposes that metaphors are governed by less precise and/or less formal mapping-rules but nonetheless are still concerned with two sets of relationships, one of which is being used to understand something about the other. As such, Gentner (1982, p. 107) says that a metaphor “conveys an artistic or expressive non-literal comparison of a certain form.” Whatever the case, she establishes the term “analogy” as a broader construct embracing a variety of phenomena including, for example (what in the physical sciences are sometimes referred to as) models and in the humanities, maps, schemas or structures. In light of such conjecture, the term analogy will henceforth be used in this article.

This article is structured in three sections. First there is a literature review which culminates in the identification of key methodological problems with the study of organizational culture. Second, an analytic framework which facilitates understanding of analogies is discussed. Third, the paper presents and defends a strategy for overcoming – and writing about – or at least combating certain methodological limitations that arise when researchers use analogies to aid understanding of organizational culture.

Literature Review: Representations of organizational culture

For purposes of the following discussion, the object of analytic interest – organizational culture – is viewed by the authors to have a working definition which, despite being at times hard to operationalize, will be meaningful for the majority of people who find themselves in work or bureaucratic settings. Specifically, organizational culture, for purposes of the current narrative, refers to collections of stories, principles and priorities (broadly conceived) that people are aware of and, to varying degrees constrained and governed by, that exist within a circumscribed setting. – Whatever the case, in spite of methodological problems such as changing definitions, arbitrary use of analogies (see the aforementioned discussion on this latter matter drawing on Gentner` s work) and ambiguous agendas, it is possible to approximately place ideas about culture on a continuum ranging from more functionalist to more interpretivist (inspired by Burrell et al., 1979).

In the current application, on the one hand, a functionalist perspective attaches importance to the way elements of a system interact for a purpose within their context rather than the disembodied nature of individual elements. Terms such as order, consensus, and integration are often used to indicate this emphasis (e.g. Hatch, & Cunliffe, 2006; Martin, 2004; Pinder, & Bourgeois, 1983). On the other hand, an interpretivist perspective stresses the experiences of individuals forming part of a unit of analysis. These latter views typically inquire about how members of a group or organisation view their circumstances. Underlying this distinction is a notion akin to the mechanistic/organic dichotomy, first delineated by Burns and Stalker (1961).² The functionalist/interpretivist continuum offers three related advantages when reflecting on literature addressing organizational culture. First, it enables an understanding of the historical antecedents of research and theorising. Early research, from the 1950s, was mostly in the functionalist tradition (e.g., Jaques, 1951) and later research, from about the 1980s, was mostly

² The frog versus bicycle example is often used to explain this distinction. The pieces of a frog have no utility individually. The leg of a frog, if amputated, cannot be used for another purpose. But a bicycle is different; its parts are modular.

interpretivist (Pondy et al., 1983; Frost et al., 1985). Second, it contextualises agendas including employer-related agendas. For example, if a manager takes a functionalist view of culture and says “our chain is only as strong as its weakest link,” they reveal that they consider sub-optimal performance on the part of a team member as an especially serious matter. However, if a manager says that they want their people “to love coming to work,” an interpretivist perspective, then they are stressing that the impressions of work held by each team member should be managed and that they, the employer, have a responsibility to improve the workplace. Underlying each narrative is a differently placed burden of responsibility. For practical purposes, functionalists are inclined to assign blame for problems and single out individuals (e.g., Burrell, & Morgan, 1979). By contrast, interpretivists leave open the possibility that problems need not necessarily be anyone’s fault. Third, and perhaps most relevant to present purposes, a functionalist/interpretivist continuum provides a scheme for classifying analogies which are associated with culture. In the remainder of this section these advantages are explored as part of the literature review.

In the 1950s the functionalist tradition emerged as the first effort to grapple with the nature of organizational culture. For example, Jaques (1951, p. 251) refers to culture as a “general code” enabling individuals to operate in a common way. A group member who is not able to properly access, understand or, for whatever reason, use the firm’s culture-code is viewed as maladjusted. Jaques does not devote attention to describing how the code originates, how it gets internalized by members of a work team, or how it is evolved.³ An idea which could be viewed as a modern incarnation of Jaques’s code conception is that culture is a “software of the mind” or a “mental program.” For example, still working in the functionalist tradition, Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 6) compared computer programs and their relation to hardware with the relationship that culture has with the collective actions of people in a workplace. They use this form of understanding (really an instantiation of abductive reasoning) to retrospectively distinguish between members of groups or categories.

³ Jaques devotes little attention to addressing how change occurs or causal sequences but rather merely describes a series of cross-sectional shifts.

Hofstede's methodology has also been applied prospectively and/or for purposes of prediction (Bashir et al., 2011; Mazaheri et al., 2011; Sartorius et al., 2011). There are at least two related conceptual limitations of the Hofstede paradigm. First, the nature and scope of the functioning of machines and computers is controlled absolutely by the code that is written to govern their operation.⁴ Hence, the software analogy is inclined to portray culture as the only important influence on the collective actions of individuals. Second, consistent with the software/hardware relationship, Hofstede implicitly portrays individuals forming part of a culture as passive agents who succumb to its influence. However, he offers no evidence that this is the case.

Writing from an interpretivist perspective, Deal and Kennedy (1982) describe culture as a "force" that influences group behaviour. The strength of this energy is conceived of as the degree of collective commitment to common values. However, it is difficult to understand how a "force," conventionally conceived of as a physical phenomenon, could corral individual behavior towards a group norm. In this respect the Deal and Kennedy perspective embodies a problem which besets other scholarship addressing organizational culture. Specifically, they invoke abstract, and/or ill-defined, constructs to inform understanding of more concrete ideas. This type of problem became the subject of controversy following the publication of Pinder and Bourgeois's (1982) article which asserted that the use of tropes (a generic figure of speech including analogies and metaphors) in the administrative sciences should be limited because an emphasis on second-order phenomena has potential to remove analytic focus from an object of interest.⁵ Deal and Kennedy's (1982) conceptualisation potentially falls victim to this trap, principally because "force" remains unclear and distracting. However, it is perhaps relatively easy to understand what it means to "share a commitment" to a particular value. For example, two colleagues may agree that it is important to not steal and, at the same time, each be unconcerned about keeping their workplaces neat and

⁴ Assuming certain basic preconditions, like adequate electricity etc.

⁵ Morgan (1983) wrote a rejoinder in which he reasserted the utility tropes.

tidy. In such a case, joint-commitment seems intuitive and a comprehensive understanding of what is occurring can be accomplished without introducing a third variable.⁶ Indeed, conceptions of “force” lead to a less elegant and parsimonious model of the values/commitment phenomenon because they insert additional steps into the understanding process.

Some authors refer to organizational culture as glue that sticks together members of an organised group (Gallagher et al., 2008; Larsson et al., 2003; Meyerson, & Martin, 1987). This representation, a functionalist view, expresses the tendency for team players to reach consensus and harmony. In invoking the idea of glue, it is necessary to specify which of its properties informs comprehension. Aside from being sticky, glue is potentially destructive and/or messy when applied too liberally. For example, glue can connect together dissimilar elements without transforming them and whilst retaining its independence. However, if too much glue is used to connect elements, the connecting may be accomplished but the glue itself may be too obvious and/or render the finished product unattractive. Hence, using glue inappropriately tends to make things worse; a goal may be achieved but at too great a cost. Whatever the case, if glue is presented as a pro-management metaphor (e.g., Alvesson, 1993) then, for reasons that are not made explicit, it must function perfectly and there can be no concept of it being applied too liberally.

Schein (2009) views culture as having the dimension of depth. Depth is accessed hierarchically: first through observing artefacts; then through identifying values and norms; and, finally through establishing the shared but idiosyncratic assumptions of a group. Implicit in this conception is the notion of sequentially more complex levels of understanding. For example, in contrast to certain tribal African communities, in Western societies wrist watches are a common item of apparel. They are worn because people attach importance to the management and control of time; a value. The relevant assumption underlying this value is that time is measurable and has meaningful benchmarks such as hours which are routinely used to regulate a sequential flow of daily

⁶ An influence on these values will be regression towards a mean.

activity. Schein`s three-stage representation is more elaborated than the conceptualisations of earlier functionalists, including Jaques (1951) and Hofstede (1980), as well as Deal and Kennedy (1982). However, Schein`s conception of depth is not fully explained. It appears to arise because of the limitations that language has in conveying meaning. Specifically, beyond the boundaries of linguistic utility there is a grey zone where an interlocutor may have an understanding that cannot be easily conveyed to a third party. This problem does not occur in relation to all that needs to be understood. For example, language may be well adapted to efficiently communicating everything that could ever be known about what a pencil is and how it functions. However, as is well known to poets, language works less well for understanding what love, pain, fear and disgust are. Assuming that there is some shared post-linguistic understanding of certain concepts, Schein is vague about how it originates. He says only that one needs to experience a target phenomenon for an extended period.

Joanne Martin (1992, 2002), using the *Peace Corps* to illustrate her points, proposes a model of organizational culture based on the analogy of a terrain to be mapped with three different layers of information. She labels these as perspectives; a description which may create confusion arising from “mixed metaphors.”⁷ The perspectives, which are viewed here as too broadly defined, are: integrated, which mainly refers to the unique managerial point of view on organizational life; differentiated, a conflict-based perspective which refers to opposing organizational groups; and, fragmented, which reflects ambiguity within the organisation. Empirical and polemic studies of organizational culture have used Martin`s three-perspective model (e.g., Garibaldi de Hilal, 2006; Kavanagh, & Ashkanasy, 2006; Lewis et al., 2003). It may be that Martin`s conception is best suited to the industrial-age workplace model where all members of a firm are located in one physical setting. When analysing modern multi-location firms, geography is a potentially confounding variable.

Alvesson`s seminal conception of organizational culture as multi-level traffic is theory development in the interpretivist tradition (1993). According

⁷ i.e. A map cannot be ‘covered’ with perspectives but may be able to be ‘covered’ with layers.

to this analogy, the construct is comprised of different “levels” which present themselves in an organisation. Culture at the “great” or highest level is conceived of as able to cross more than one organisation. Conversely, culture at a “lower” level is specific to a part of an organisation. It expresses the affiliation of a number of members to a particular group. For example two scholars may work together as employees of a particular university and be similarly influenced by the culture of their institution; a lower-level influence. The same two scholars may have different ethnic origins; “the great level influence” which would compel them to behave differently. In passing, there appears to be intuitive problems with using the analogy of traffic to aid understanding of organizational culture. The main malaise here arises because “traffic” seems to be inextricably linked to the idea of movement and change whereas organisation culture is frequently portrayed as conveying something static or stable about a group. In subsequent work, Alvesson (2008) used the analogy of a football game to aid understanding of organizational culture. Alvesson’s rationale for choosing football as a good analogy for culture is not well developed but appears to have something to do with his perception that the notion of a team-based contest is the most important defining feature of organizational life. Perhaps “football” as a replacement for “traffic” is also a response to a lack of apparent intuitive connection between traffic and culture. However, Alvesson was subsequently self-critical of “football.” In developing Alvesson’s (1993) work, Racine (2010) used the analogy of circulation to analyse organized networks.

In this section it was argued that diverse analogies have been used to aid understanding of organizational culture. However, often the rationale for the choice of analogy is either weak or non-existent. Organizational theorists have also identified other, subtler, problems with this *genre* of research; including the suggestion that multiple analogies make it difficult to gain a global grasp of a phenomenon’s essential nature (e.g., Schultz, & Hatch, 1996).

Problems with culture: A synopsis

Literature addressing organizational culture is piecemeal. Overall it suggests that theorists have different understandings of what culture is and how it should

be investigated. Certain key controversies surrounding the phenomenon have methodological origins and pose special challenges for writing, particularly scholarly writing. These may be summarized as problems of definition and/or contested focus; unstated and/or implicit agendas; and, the arbitrary nature of analogies. These problems are summarized in this section.

The definition of organizational culture is contested. More fundamentally, theorists have not typically given good rationale for their choices. Indeed, there exist at least five viable definitions of organizational culture and no easy way of favoring one of these (Hatch, & Cunliffe, 2006). Mainstream but divergent options are presented below.

- *“The culture of the factory is its customary and traditional way of thinking and doing things, which is shared to a greater or lesser degree by all its members, and which new members must learn, and at least partially accept, in order to be accepted into service in the firm”* (Jaques, 1951).
- *“Culture is a system of publicly and collectively accepted meanings operating for a given group at a given time”* (Pettigrew, 1979).
- *“Organizations [are] culture-bearing milieux, that is, [they are] distinctive social units possessed of a set of common understandings for organizing action (and of) languages and other symbolic vehicles for expressing common understandings”* (Louis, 1983).
- *“Culture is the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with the problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough... to be taught to new members”* (Schein, 1985).
- *“Culture refers to the knowledge members of a given group are thought to more or less share; knowledge of the sort that is said to inform, embed, shape, and account for the routine and not-so-routine activities of the members of the culture”* (Van Maanen, 1988).

Analogies can be used with undeclared intentions. They may not necessarily be deployed to promote understanding (a scholarly objective) but rather to inculcate commitment to a course of action or philosophy (an indoctrination

objective). For example, a manager may say “culture is like family” (Greenfield, 2009, exposing the Lehman Brothers case). In choosing this analogy, the manager invites their team to believe that, although each member is different, their association is based on love and respect, and that each member has a common destiny. In a case like this, the same manager would be unlikely to say why they chose family as an analogy and would probably not say that they are trying to make members of their team think in a certain way. Specifically, they would not distinguish between a scholarly and an indoctrination-related objective.

Although a popular way of understanding culture has been to use analogies, this strategy is associated with three kinds of problems. First, the role and scope of an analogy should be explored in advance of its use. In the case of culture, this is rarely done. For example, authors may just say “culture is like glue” (Gallagher et al., 2008).⁸ The second problem is there is no obvious and defensible way of favoring one analogy over another. This problem is not trivial because analogies inevitably draw attention to important features of a target construct. For example, on the one hand, if culture is like glue, then perhaps its exclusive role is to bind elements together. On the other hand, if culture is like a magnet (Frellick, 2011; Upenieks, & Abelew, 2006), then it will pull certain elements towards it whilst repelling others. Third, when analogies are used, it is not necessarily clear which of their attributes are relevant to the target, organizational culture. Even if a salient attribute is explicitly identified, the reason it is being favored seems arbitrary. For example, glue is sticky, but it is also external to the two elements that it connects together.⁹ If glue is being favored as an analogy for culture, it is reasonable to ask which of these two attributes is more important to understanding.¹⁰ Henceforth,

⁸ It is not suggested here that authors do not often attempt to explain how culture is like glue. In fact authors do typically explain how culture is like the analogy they have chosen – but they typically do not offer a solid rationale for use of their chosen analogy as part of their methodology or discuss the limits of using analogies as an aid to understanding.

⁹ i.e. glue is not incorporated into the two elements that it holds together – if it were, they would not be stuck together; they would be a single seamless element.

¹⁰ Maybe both elements are equally important, but no methodologically defensible strategy has been offered to resolve this.

the three aforementioned problems will be referred to as the multiple analogy syndrome. The next section focuses on this matter.

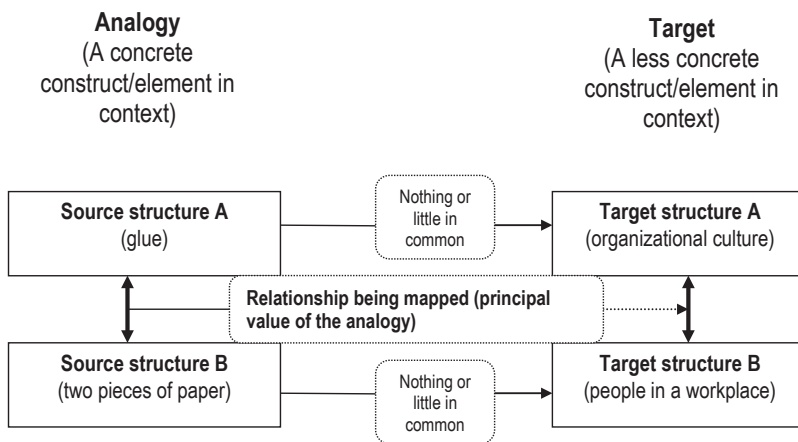
Analogy/Metaphors: A frame of reference

Consistent with the definition of Alvesson and Spicer (2011), “a metaphor is created when a term (sometimes referred as a ‘source’) is transferred from one system or level of meaning to another (the ‘target’).” This understanding can be further refined. As noted in this essay’s introduction, the terms analogy and metaphor are sometimes used interchangeably to indicate something that is tangible in nature but which can be conceptualised to have at least two elements interacting in an obvious way (i.e. have a defined relationship), and which can be used explicitly to shed light on the same kind of relationship for a more abstract pair of constructs. For reasons also explained, the broader idea of “analogy” is preferred here, mostly because it has greater utility (i.e. is applicable to a wider range of phenomena). The reasoning presented in this paper draws on the work of Gentner (1983, 1988; Gentner et al., 2001). Figure 1 depicts the critical components of its conceptualisation. In this illustration, an analogy is established to help understand a target, which should be more abstract. The analogy must have at least two readily apparent elements or structures. The target must also have a minimum of two sub-components but it is not essential that these have anything in common with the corresponding elements of the analogy. Indeed, the structures of the target are unlikely to have anything in common with the equivalent structures of the analogy, the source. For example, if glue is used as an analogy “source” for culture, it has likely been chosen because one of its attributes is that it can join elements together whilst retaining its independence.¹¹ Specifically, glue may be used to stick two pieces of paper together. On the other hand, it is possible

¹¹ In this case, these two things are stuck together with glue. However, if glue has not retained its independence, it may also be said that these two things have become the same thing.

that culture could be viewed as a non-tangible psychological phenomenon that makes people stick together.¹² In a de-contextualised sense, glue (source structure A) has either no or limited points of correspondence with culture (target structure A), and pieces of paper (source structure B) have nothing in particular in common with people in a workplace (target structure B). The idea of glue can only aid in the understanding of culture when it is revealed how glue interacts with other elements. Thus, it is the relation between glue and the paper that it interacts with that represents the explanatory value of the analogy. Furthermore, in this example, a particular attribute of glue is implicitly singled out as being important, namely its stickiness.¹³

Figure 1. Explanatory value of an analogy vis-à-vis organizational culture



Source: Own study.

¹² The word 'stick' here is used colloquially and implies to do things in the same way or to look at things in the same way.

¹³ Glue has other attributes. For example, it is invariably a gel-like substance, inexpensive to buy, and noxious tasting. However, none of these qualities has implications – of the kind being emphasized – for elements that glue interacts with.

Employing a rigorous theory to discriminate amongst analogies

This section focuses on the problem of multiple analogies and outlines a strategy for discriminating between them to distinguish which has the most utility for purposes of illumination. Specifically, it presents a method for answering the question: How can one decide that a certain analogy better aids understanding of organizational culture than others? And/or, which analogy best represents the nature of organizational culture? The identified strategy has two phases: data gathering; and data analysis.

A research design for addressing and writing about the multiple analogy syndrome

Data gathering, phase one, can be done through focus groups or structured surveys. The idea is to present non-experts with a series of analogies which have been used to represent or understand culture (source analogies). These participants should then be formally asked two questions. What attributes does this thing have? What does this thing do? As part of the same exercise the target concept, organizational culture, should be presented on the list of analogies. It would be useful to add to this list analogies that have not been formally presented in literature but which may inform understanding of “organizational culture” and/or which may focus attention on salient relationships between elements of organizational culture as a disembodied entity and elements of collective behavior. Table 1 presents a template for this exercise.

Table 1. Template for data gathering

Analogy/ Metaphor (Source) (A)	What attributes does this thing have? (B)	What does this thing do? (C) (its main functions/ purposes)
Battlefield		
Compass		
Eye Blinders		
Fence		
Glue		
Hologram		
Magnet		
Phone Network		
Road Traffic		
Sacred Cow		
Organizational Culture		

Source: Own study.

In phase two, the analytic phase, a third-party analyst (or analysts) is appointed. This person's job is to independently consider de-contextualised output from the focus group. Such output should be presented in the form of a series of "bundles of attributes" (the individual cells of column B) and a series of "main functions" (the individual cells of column C). Main functions should not be associated with any source and "bundles of attributes" should not be associated with any "source" or "main function." The analyst should be informed of how focus group participants viewed the purpose of organizational culture and what they viewed as its main attributes. However, the analyst should not be told about the source of other "bundles of attributes" or the source of other "main purposes." Their job is to examine which bundle of attributes most closely resembles the bundle of attributes associated with culture. There are various ways of doing this but a Likert-type scale would be particularly suitable (seven represents an identical

“culture-bundle”-“unknown-bundle” relationship, and one represents no similarity between the “culture-bundle” and the “unknown-bundle”). Figure 2 depicts the two tasks that the analyst is required to perform.

Figure 2. Two tasks that the analyst is required to perform

Task 1: “Main function” matching		
“Main function”	Matches with stated main function of organizational culture (mark out of 7)	Conclusion
Unknown “Main function” #1	?/7	The analyst decides which main function best approximates the main function of culture
Unknown “Main function” #2	?/7	
Unknown “Main function” #X	?/7	
Task 2: “Bundles of attributes” matching		
Unknown “Bundle of attributes” #1	?/7	The analyst decides which bundle of attributes best approximates the bundle of attributes associated with culture
Unknown “Bundle of attributes” #2	?/7	
Unknown “Bundle of attributes” #X	?/7	

Source: Own study.

Rationale for the design and implications for scholarly communication

Analogies have been used by theorists studying organizational culture because they may elucidate at least one attribute of the relationship that individuals have with the target. However, there is mostly no objective way of validating which attribute or combination of attributes is universally perceived as the most salient or which analogies best portray this/these attributes. A solution is to disconnect the name or label of a source (analogy) from considerations of its characteristics and/or function(s).

Previous theorising addressing organizational culture has been arbitrary in two senses. First, authors have typically suggested that a certain object and its relationship with its context are an appropriate analogy for understanding organizational culture. Second, the attributes being emphasised, either implicitly or explicitly, of a chosen analogy are not typically accompanied by methodologically defensible rationale. *Forrest Gump's* reference to a box of chocolates provides an intuitively appealing manifestation of both of these problems. Why has a box of chocolates been chosen? What is it about the way that chocolates interact with their context that is important for understanding what life is like? The two aforementioned problems can be isolated and resolved through asking a naïve person to identify salient attributes of qualitatively different three-dimensional things without knowing why they have to complete such a task. In such a paradigm, participants cannot have an *a-priori* agenda when they identify their bundles of attributes. This scenario leads to a collective understanding of what seems the most obvious about different kinds of ordinary things. For example, if a group of people decides that, when they think of glue, they also think of its property of stickiness, then there is external evidence that stickiness is an objectively important propriety of glue. To the extent that the deciding group is representative of a broader population, then a researcher may confidently assert that glue, despite its various attributes and potential functions, is first and foremost sticky.

If a third party examines different functions and/or bundles of attributes and is able to rank them as being more or less closely associated without knowing what the bundles of attributes refer to, there is a basis for differentiating between the suitability of different analogies. In a case where two bundles of attributes and/or functions are judged to be very similar, either object could be an appropriate analogy for the other. Lists of attributes and/or functions work best when they imply something about the way a source relates to its context, a principle depicted in Figure 1.¹⁴ By convention, less abstract elements are used as the analogy for more abstract elements, a principle that establishes which

¹⁴ Therefore, in the case of glue, stickiness is a more helpful attribute than gel-like.

element should be the source and which should be the target. For example, culture may be something that “sticks” elements together and glue may be something that “sticks” elements together. When the attribute of stickiness is presented on two occasions to a dispassionate critic without in each case being associated with anything in particular, then the dispassionate critic will likely observe two instances of the same property and deduce that this property must emanate from a similar kind of thing.

The methodology previously described can be applied in the case of culture or more generally. It has utility when there are several possible analogies that are competing to explain a target concept. It establishes a basis for picking an analogy that will optimally aid understanding. The technique may be viewed as an evidence-based check on intuition.

Conclusion

In reminding us that life is like a box of chocolates, Forrest Gump inadvertently touched on a problem that limits the potential of research using analogies to deepen understanding of organizational culture. Hence, despite the evocative nature of much scholarship addressing this topic, the problem of methodological rigor – and defending, in writing, a chosen approach – continues to plague research. As a consequence, there exists – what has been identified here as – the multiple analogy syndrome. The strategy presented in this essay is a remedy for this malaise and a tool for writing with greater precision about ethereal phenomena (in the present case, culture). Somewhat self-evidently, the strategy presented is generic. As such, it has potential application wherever analogies have become a principal means of concretizing the abstract.

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