

**Supermarkets and Culture Clash:  
The Epistemological Role of Metaphors in Administrative Practice**

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Abstract

Metaphor analysis has traditionally treated its subject as a figure of speech, that is, as a purely literary device which may be replaced by literal language. More recent work suggests that metaphors should be thought of as figures of thought strongly based in cognition and, therefore, with implications for action. This article examines a particular organizational metaphor, created by founders and used by members, which helped form a new organization. Tacitly known, it shaped building design; program offerings; management, staff, and client behaviors; and criteria for evaluation. But it also fueled conflict with one subdivision of the organization whose professional practice was not in keeping with the actions suggested by the metaphor. The case example, then, illustrates a metaphor which was both a help in shaping organizational action and a source of difficulty.

While metaphors may blind sight while they highlight some features of organizational life, it is not clear that this pitfall can be eliminated by substituting either literal language or other metaphors. Counter to the view that metaphors are decorations or unclear thought and thus unproblematically interchanged, this article argues that organizational metaphors are cognitively grounded and cannot be replaced without changing the way people think about and understand the nature and mission of their organization. The article explores the argument that metaphors should be made explicit and suggests some concerns raised by this position.

The analysis of metaphors has, especially in the last decade, expanded beyond the realm of metaphor as a literary device -- a figure of speech -- to examine its role in cognition and reasoning -- a "figure of thought" (Lakoff, 1986) underlying even that language we regard as conventional. Appreciation of the cognitive role of metaphor allows us to attend to the relationship between metaphor and action in organizational settings, which is the concern of this article.

In the social sciences, recent metaphor analysis has focused on matters of both theory and practice. The former concerns metaphor's epistemological role in creating researchers' theoretical categories and concepts: dominant metaphors are seen to underlie the theories of the field and to structure researchers' creation of new knowledge and categories of analysis. We find this concern in sociology (Brown, 1976); in political science (Landau, 1964; Myrdal, 1968; Rayner, 1984; Yanow, 1987a); and in organizational studies (Bourgeois and Pinder, 1983; Keeley, 1980; Manning, 1979; Morgan, 1980, 1983, 1986; Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982; Yanow, 1987b).

The second focus of analysis has been on the ways in which metaphors used in daily life shape public thought about and action towards the subject of the metaphor. Traditionally, most work on metaphors and general social life has been done by anthropologists studying geographically remote societies (e.g., Fernandez, 1972, 1974). Attention to the role of metaphors in directing everyday life in a Western or American context has been undertaken typically in other disciplines. Political science and policy analysis have been concerned with rhetorical devices in public language (such as social policies or politicians' speeches) which categorize political events and direct public

perception of them and action in their regard (Bosman, 1987; Edelman, 1977; Garrison, 1981; Howe, 1988; D.F. Miller, 1985; E. F. Miller, 1979; Rein and Schon, 1977; Schon, 1979; Stone, 1988; Titus, 1945). And organizational studies has focused on the connection between organizational metaphors and organizational action (Donnellon, Gray, and Bougon, 1986; Krefting and Frost, 1985; Merten and Schwartz, 1982; Pondy, 1983; Smith and Simmons, 1983; Srivastva and Barrett, 1988).

This article follows in the tradition of examining the implications for action of a metaphor created by members of an organization, looking at a case example drawn from field research. The focus here is not on how metaphors structure disciplinary thought, nor does the article explore political rhetoric. Rather, its concern is a metaphor which was born publicly and functioned as a figure of thought in directing organizational action, including action relating to the implementation of a policy mandate.

The article presents the case of the creation of the Israel Corporation of Community Centers (ICCC), a government corporation, at a time when "community center" was a vague notion. Early in its history, the ICCC's community center came to be seen as a "supermarket." Although public and commonly-held, the metaphor was not explicitly examined; yet it helped, tacitly, to shape the path of a new organization, to focus other ideas influencing the agency's development, and to determine appropriate and inappropriate management and staff behavior. Adoption of the metaphor made it possible for the organization to proceed with its tasks and created criteria for evaluation. At the same time, the metaphor came to bear radically different meaning for another division within the same organization. It fueled a crisis within the organization between administrators and a division of professionals. Unlike the Rumpelstiltskin myth discussed by Smith and Simmons (1983), which was

identified by members and analysts after several months of organizational action and used by them explicitly in a metaphoric manner to explain preceding events, the supermarket metaphor in this case was created early in the history of the agency by members only and tacitly suggested how the organization should develop. Unlike the community mental health case analyzed by Merten and Schwartz (1982) where conflict developed among three sub-groups of a single agency, each supporting its own metaphor, the ICCC case describes a single metaphor which was understood differently by two agency divisions.

The article begins with a discussion of what metaphor is and follows with the presentation of the case and its analysis, drawing on Polanyi's (1966) notion of tacit knowledge to explain how the organizational metaphor in the case worked epistemologically to determine administrative action. In the end, questions are raised about making metaphors explicit or replacing them with other metaphors. Much has been written about what metaphors are and how they work. [1] Lakoff and Johnson (1980) offered the view that metaphors are an expression of a culture's basic ideas; they determine how we see the world which we experience, as well as how we act in that world. This paper presents a case example which demonstrates that metaphors "are necessary, and not just nice" (Ortony, 1975).

#### **How does a metaphor mean?**

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, "it means just what I choose it to mean -- neither more nor less." [2]

What exactly a metaphor is, and how it works, has long been the subject of debate in circles of philosophy, linguistics, psychology, and literary theory. Much of this debate is captured in Black (1962) and Ortony (1979) and will not be repeated here. Part of the history of the debate, however, is germane to

the subject at hand. Metaphor has for a long time been treated as a figure of speech or literary device reflecting imprecise thinking or added on to non-metaphorical speech for decoration. As far back as Plato and Aristotle, metaphoric language has been contrasted with literal language. According to the theory which prevailed, metaphoric language was the inferior of the two (being less precise, less scientific, appealing to the emotions, and so forth) and could be eliminated, leaving only literal figures. Traditional metaphor analysis has focused on how these ornamental figures of speech work.

Newer developments treat metaphor more as a way of seeing and/or learning, and as such, as an elemental part of language and thought, rather than as decoration which can be eliminated. In this approach metaphors as literary devices constitute a subset of the more general human cognitive activity. As Lakoff and Johnson (1987, p. 79) wrote, "Metaphor is not a harmless exercise in naming. It is one of the principal means by which we understand our experience and reason on the basis of that understanding. To the extent that we act on our reasoning, metaphor plays a role in the creation of reality." It is this approach which constitutes the backdrop for this article.

Following Black (1962, 1979) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980), let us define metaphor as the juxtaposition of two superficially unlike elements in a single context, where the separately understood meanings of both interact to create a new perception of each, and especially of the focus of the metaphor. Subjected to analysis, the surface unlikeness yields a set of criteria which both metaphoric vehicle and focus share.<sup>3</sup> Some simple examples might be, "The grass is always greener in the other person's yard;" or, "green with envy;" or "the greenhorn fresh off the boat." In each of these examples, what we might take to be our "common sense" notion of "green-ness" is brought into four different settings, illuminating both the concept of green (the vehicle) and its focus in

new ways.

When we consider the link between perception and action, metaphors which initially appear to be merely descriptive often acquire a prescriptive aspect. No longer are we only presenting new insights into a situation; we are also suggesting the possibility of action in response to the situation described by the metaphor. In talking about the economic situation, for example, we might say:

Inflation has pinned us to the wall.

Our biggest enemy right now is inflation.

Inflation has robbed me of my savings. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 33)

"Inflation," itself an older metaphor which presents the state of the economy as blown up like a balloon, distorted by swelling from some more natural state, is here presented as a street fighter, an enemy seeking to destroy, a robber. Putting monetary swelling in such a context suggests the possibility (indeed, the necessity) of response: one does not turn the other cheek to a fighter; rather, one searches for vulnerable places and plans a counterattack. These metaphors preclude the possibility that inflation might be immune to planning and policy. If, for example, inflation were part of an inevitable cycle, the best defense would not stave it off, nor the best offense rid us of it.

Some of the attributes of metaphors are illustrated in this example. Metaphors direct vision and thinking. While they give new insight into and understanding of some things, they can blind us to other aspects of the situation. By highlighting some aspects and obscuring others, they organize perceptions of reality and suggest appropriate actions in light of those perceptions. In the same way, organizational metaphors may suggest a perception and a course of action for administrators and other organizational members to follow.

Metaphors, then, are neither true nor false. "The more important questions," wrote Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 158),

are those of appropriate action. In most cases, what is at issue...

[are] the perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the

actions that are sanctioned by it. ... We draw inferences, set

goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of

how we in part structure our experience, consciously and

unconsciously, by means of metaphor.

Moreover, the knowledge which links metaphoric perception with action is learned and known tacitly, without being made explicit to ourselves or to others. As noted earlier, the concept "inflation" itself is a metaphor which suggests that something has been blown up and thereby distorted from its normal condition. Yet, we use it in common parlance (as we use the fighter metaphors) without explicit cognizance of its metaphoric nature. We have made inflation part of our economic reality and developed theories to account for it and strategies to prevent it. "Inflation" is an old, or conventional, metaphor.[4]

It is their conventionality, and the tacit knowledge mutually shared and communicated in their use, that mask the power of metaphors to shape action, since we are not in the habit of making explicit the implications for action which are embedded in the metaphors we use.

In addition, metaphors may also give expression to some prior unarticulated understanding of a situation. In a culture which values governmental planning and policy-making, it would not be unusual to create metaphors for the economy which suggest action rather than passive acceptance. That is, metaphors can be models of a situation as well as models for it, in Geertz's phrase (1973, p. 99).

Metaphors, then, are not commonly understood according to the literal

meanings of their words. To talk of "housing decay", for example, is not to mean literally that the wood is rotting or that the bricks are decomposing. The decay metaphor is understood through implicit analysis of its meaning in a particular context of reference (in this case, the deterioration of a typically lower-class neighborhood).

On the other hand, metaphorical meaning presupposes an understanding of its literal sense in some context. If we did not know the ordinary meaning of "decay", we could not apply it sensibly to deteriorating houses. In other words, for metaphors to be understood as part of public discourse, rather than private musings, their literal meanings must be part of a shared context -- "a set of standard beliefs...([or] current platitudes) that are the common possession of the members of some speech community" (Black, 1962, p. 40) or, we might add, thought community.

When the interpretive context changes, the meaning of the metaphor may change as well. In this way, metaphors entertain the possibility for multiple meanings. [5] In the Arabic of some Middle Eastern countries, for example, "green" connotes maturity, ripeness; in which case a "greenhorn" would not carry its American English connotations of new, bumbling, unknowing, and our other green metaphors would acquire new meanings or become altogether senseless. To the extent that we can explicate the organizational contexts in which metaphors have been used, we can attend to potential differences in meaning and interpretation.

This analysis implies two cautions in analyzing the role of metaphors in organizational settings. First, if metaphors have capacities for multiple meanings, and meanings are dependent on contexts, we cannot assume that an organizational metaphor holds the same meaning for all members of an organization unless we can demonstrate that the entire organization constitutes

a single thought community. Second, and deriving from this, the organizational analyst or researcher needs to develop the ability to elicit the organizational contexts in which metaphors are used.

This approach to the analysis of organizational metaphors suggests that we cannot eliminate them as though they were mere decorative additions. We also must be cautious against the thought that in discovering the meaning(s) of the organizational metaphor, we will be able to get down to the root of the organizational problem and thereby eliminate the "hidden" source which directs organizational action. If metaphor is indeed a figure of thought, reflecting thought as well as shaping it, attempts to eliminate the metaphor may not eliminate the thought. In finding another expression of that thought, we may, as D. F. Miller (1985) notes, be simply substituting one metaphor for another. In ferreting out one metaphor, we might only discover that it stands on the shoulders of another, much as inflation, the enemy, rests on an older convention of a misshapen, bloated economy. What we may discover in analyzing organizational metaphors are ways in which language both shapes and reflects our thinking and our action, rather than that we are getting to the final core of an issue. Metaphors and their meanings are potentially always evolving, with inherent implications for the analysis of administrative behavior and organizational action. [6]

**Metaphors in Use: Creating the Israel Corporation of Community Centers**

"When I make a word do a lot of work like that,"  
said Humpty Dumpty, "I always pay it extra."

In 1969 Israel's Knesset (Parliament) passed the statute creating the Israel Corporation of Community Centers (ICCC). [7] According to preliminary government studies and agency documents, its purpose was, among other things,

to provide leisure time recreational, social and cultural activities to residents of rural towns and urban slums. It intended to serve all ages within a town or neighborhood; to provide a wide variety of programs and services; and to be non-partisan. Agency founders saw these three elements of its design as distinguishing the ICCC's community centers from all other activity centers. The Executive Director portrayed the community center as filling an inter-agency coordinating role, integrating at the local level services for the elderly, for juvenile delinquents, and for others which were funded by Departments of various national-level Ministries. In this he also saw the centers' uniqueness.

To accomplish its goals, the agency needed to establish a presence in each location and hire program staff for these sites and for its headquarters. The Executive Director and the Board of Directors would have to be able to convey to potential employees what a community center was and did. They would have to project these meanings to potential clients, as well, in order to create a constituency for their services.

"Community center" was an American concept. Inspiration for the development of the ICCC idea came, in part, from people with experience in American community centers who discussed their experiences with the ICCC's founders. According to several of his assistants, in the Fall of 1966, Zalman Aranne, then Minister of Education and Culture, received three American visitors who told him they thought "community centers" would be a reasonable solution to some of Israel's social problems. The next day, Minister Aranne called Dr. Ya'el Pozner, head of the Ministry's Comprehensive Schools Program, into his office. She recalled that he told her about the visit. "Do you know what a community center is?" he then asked her. "I don't know what this thing is. Why don't you set up a committee and decide ... whether this would be a

good idea."

There was no equivalent to "community center" either in the Hebrew language or in Israeli society. Although there were entities performing similar functions in Israel (the urban "Y", the "Bet Am" on the kibbutz -- a hall where meetings were held, where members gathered to read the papers, listen to radio, watch movies, etc.) and in overseas Jewish communities other than in the U.S., they were known by other names. This meant that unless a potential center director or staff-person had been to community centers in the United States, he or she had little common-sense understanding of what the community center was to do or of what his or her task should be after unlocking the doors at 8 o'clock in the morning. Moreover, since there were other recreational centers for youth, center staff themselves needed to understand, as well as to communicate to potential clients, how their center was going to be different: why go to the community center instead of to the Labor Youth recreation hall around the corner? This was especially important to the ICCC since other centers were typically sponsored by political parties, while its own mandate was to provide a nonpartisan alternative.

The nature of the community center concept was not made any less abstract by its name. There were linguistic problems with the direct translation of "community center" into the Hebrew language. "Community" ("kehilla") in Hebrew historically meant a self-governing congregation of Jews, a political unit organized to provide civic, educational, and ritual services. A kehilla might have a synagogue, but it had no "center," physical or spiritual. That made "community center" linguistically suggestive of a place for religious worship, rather than for musicals or karate classes. In addition, the literal Hebrew translation was awkward to say and sounded like a translated foreign phrase rather than like an indigenous concept. The phrase made little sense,

conceptually or linguistically, in the Israeli context. [8]

A further problem with the literal translation was that the term "community" as a program concept fell in the domain of the Ministry of Welfare, whereas the ICCC was set up under the aegis of the Ministry of Education and Culture. The Welfare portfolio and the Education and Culture portfolio had traditionally been held by two different political parties, the National Religious Party and Labor, respectively. According to one of his Special Assistants, Minister Aranne, in fathering the community center venture, insisted on choosing a name which would ensure the agency an identity separate from a competing Ministry and party. Another source wrote, the Minister "refused to use the term 'community center' only because the word ... had been pre-empted as a term by the Ministry of Social Welfare." In choosing a name which had no associations with a competing party, the Minister would create a clear address for attributing whatever political kudos might be forthcoming from the new agency's activities.

Since the new agency was initiated by the Minister of Education and Culture and some of his division heads, and would be funded primarily by the Ministry's Departments of Culture, Youth, and Sports, the ICCC was created in Hebrew as the "Corporation for Centers of Culture for Youth and Adults and for Sports" -- "matnasim", in its Hebrew acronym -- thereby creating a new Hebrew word, "matnas" (singular, accented on the second syllable). As more and more people used the word to refer to the new center buildings which were built throughout the country, it gradually caught on (although often with variant pronunciations, such as "meknas").

Though sounding more like a native word, "matnas" was equally as new a concept as "community center", and it carried no more substantive meaning than "community center" did. The newness of the "matnas" name addressed, in part,

the political need to differentiate among similar centers; but it still did not provide an image of an operational model.

In an early meeting of the Board of Directors, one of the founders referred to the community center as "a functional supermarket." The metaphor entered the oral and written traditions of the organization: it was spoken in interviews and conversations, it appeared in written documents of the time, and it also figured in discussions at training sessions for directors. The sense of the metaphor, as used by founders, administrators, and staff in interviews and in writing, was that the center would be a multi-faceted facility providing a wide variety of programs at the local level, programs that supposedly were not already available to residents locally through other agencies or commercially. Dr. Pozner, who became Vice-chairperson of the Board of Directors, Chair of the Executive Committee, and later Chair of the full Board, recalled in an interview that her early planning committee which was charged with inventing the model community center tried to design a building that would be a "functional supermarket" in that it would meet the maximum number of residents' desires. It would contain space for performances and sports, for different clubs or classes, as well as a "members' lounge." (Lavi, 1979) The ICC's 1974-75 Annual Report refers to the community center/matnas as a "supermarket of ideas and programs for all ages, at all levels." The metaphor appears in subsequent years in documents and conversations as a "supermarket of classes" and a "supermarket of services."

The supermarket metaphor gave form to what until then had been a relatively shapeless concept. It provided a focus for other ideas influencing agency development: it articulated a specific context within which matnas building design could be envisioned; it created a sense of what matnas programs should include, in terms of their variety and scope; it included ideas about

measures of success; and it suggested appropriate roles for staff and expectations for clients' behavior. Moreover, it did none of this explicitly; the knowledge about all these things was learned and communicated tacitly.

In explicating what "supermarket" can mean analytically, it is possible to see how the metaphor shaped the concept of a matnas. Just as a supermarket offers an endless variety of prepared merchandise all available in one place to a broad range of consumers, the matnas would "meet the maximum number of desires expressed by residents for programmatic activities," in the words of one of the ICCC's brochures. Just as a supermarket is a large, centrally-located, spacious building providing many things under one roof, the matnas would contain space for performances and for classes, for a library and a snack bar, for photography and for football.

In analyzing the supermarket metaphor, it is possible to generate concepts or "labels" from supermarket language which accurately describe the ICCC and its activities as they were developed. For example, the matnas would offer a full array of "pre-packaged goods": programs, activities, and clubs running the gamut from sports to crafts, from remedial education to music and dance, to be organized by matnas staff and offered "ready-made" to those who would sign up. Success would be evaluated on the basis of "volume of sales": attendance rates and the number of program activities offered. The metaphor placed a value on the "high turnover of goods": large numbers of local residents participating in the wide variety of activities. Local residents would develop "shopping lists" of what they would like to "buy" in the matnas and communicate this to the director, who would "stock" his shop with program "supplies" from various Ministry departments, "advertise" his "wares" in the neighborhood, and wait for "customers" to sign up. New matnas buildings themselves, while not identical, shared such design features common to supermarkets and different

from other buildings as a large scale and sense of expansive space. They had high ceilings, large rooms, often two floors, were typically located on or adjacent to the central town plaza, and were markedly distinct from both public and private local architecture.

In addition to shaping thought and action about program offerings and building design, the supermarket metaphor also guided thought and action about administrative and staff roles. Like a supermarket manager, the matnas director would be on hand in his office for clients/customers to come inside the building to shop for available products and to request others. Matnas staff -- sports directors, adult education coordinators, children's activities programmers, librarians, and so forth -- were cast in the role of "sales clerks" or "cashiers". They were expected to be inside the building and to promote the "pre-packaged" activities of the matnas. But, this role expectation and the programmatic implications of the metaphor contradicted the training of one particular unit of professionals hired by the ICCC to perform a key role in the centers: community organizers.

**Professionals in the Supermarket: Appropriate and Inappropriate Behavior**

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

In 1972 the Executive Director of the ICCC accepted funding to create a unit of community organizers (COs) within the agency, hiring an initial dozen COs for placement at the centers and a Division Head based at central headquarters.

The professional practice of community organization (CO), one of the traditional divisions of social work practice, is based on the principle that local residents can and should determine and articulate their needs vis a vis

government agencies (Batten, 1971). CO is a process-oriented practice, and the process of developing communities requires a long lead-time to pay off. For example, a community worker might spend more than two years getting town residents to coalesce in the building of a dam. The worker's field notes might reveal a series of daily meetings with town leaders, teachers, and various committees, all oriented toward building mutual trust and reaching the goal. Progress is difficult to measure on a weekly or monthly basis; it may be seen in retrospect, as the coalition gels or after the dam is built. But "being in the street" -- being visible, easily accessible, meeting with residents formally and informally in their homes, cafes, neighborhoods, etc. -- is a strong part of COs' professional identity.

COs in the ICCC found that they, too, were expected to work in keeping with the supermarket metaphor -- inside the matnas building, promoting its "pre-packaged" programs. But this role expectation clashed with the norms of their professional practice, which required the organizer to be in the neighborhoods meeting with residents or calling on them in their homes. "Shopkeepers" don't leave the store; but expecting the organizer to remain inside the matnas building, as the supermarket metaphor does, challenged the professional identity and principles of the organizer.

Other implications of the supermarket metaphor affected their work and similarly contradicted the norms of CO practice. CO activities (such as strengthening community ties by organizing neighborhood councils) are not typically oriented toward residents' attendance of concerts and photography courses inside a community center building. In addition, organizers expect to interact with residents in their natural settings; they go out to residents, rather than waiting for residents to come in to them. Eleven years after the agency's founding, one director -- the only woman -- expressed this idea

herself: "There's no subject that we can 'push' only as supermarket owners or clerks," she said in an interview. "We must also be outside [the building]."

Evaluation measures indicated by the supermarket metaphor -- high attendance rates, rapid turnover -- conflicted with these elements of CO practice; yet the metaphor provided no way of evaluating the effectiveness of CO practice on its own terms. For example, supermarkets in the Israeli context are more regionally oriented, less neighborhood-based; and most matnas directors were initially highly reluctant to establish the neighborhood-based extensions requested by many residents and promoted by COs in keeping with their practice, where internal attendance might have been quite high.

The idea of pre-packaged programs was similarly incompatible with the professional CO orientation toward programs developed according to local needs. This, in fact, had been embodied by the ICCC as its first Operating Principle: that center programs "will be derived from the needs of the community" in which the center was located. Following such a principle, one would expect to find different programs in different communities, rather than common, pre-formed, centrally-distributed programs (as was nonetheless typically the case in the matnasim). However, the supermarket metaphor emphasized the operational needs of the agency's planning, budgeting, and evaluation divisions for centrally-produced and distributed programs -- "pre-packaged" units which could be more easily dispensed and monitored from central headquarters -- rather than individually-tailored ones developed locally in response to residents' ideas and in accordance with the first Principle. As the Assistant Director noted, "I must believe that they [a local matnas staff] arrive at their [proposed program] idea by researching local needs, although I know that usually the idea comes directly from the director or his staff without their having ascertained local needs." His sense was corroborated by the organizer

who said, "...there were certain packaged programs that everybody was supposed to be doing, or that's what you were led to believe...."

These two contrasting models of community center action are summarized in the Table. The different ideas about daily operations, professional roles and effectiveness, presence within the matnas, attitudes toward marketing matnas activities, and program evaluation fostered conflict between community organizers and their colleagues in the centers and the center directors, as well as between the CO unit and ICCC executives. The two cultures -- the supermarket culture of agency administrators and the culture of the professional practice of the community organizers -- clashed. Activities meaningful for the one culture had no meaning for the other culture or conflicted with values held by the other culture. Neither group saw the conflict in terms of a clash between metaphoric interpretations reflecting different cultures. Each "read" the metaphor -- tacitly -- in terms of its own culture and assumed that reading to be the way to understand its meaning.

In the process of negotiating these conflicts, non-COs found a way of interpreting CO activity which fit in with their interpretation of the supermarket metaphor. The first order of business for a CO new to a particular community was to study the community: to survey residents, human service agencies, local government officials, community leaders, and so forth to find out what the local "felt needs" were, as well as to introduce oneself to the new community. When it became apparent that residents were not coming to the centers in the numbers that were anticipated, center directors and ICCC executives began to see CO neighborhood-based activity as a marketing device. In terms of the supermarket metaphor, the COs came to be seen as "door-to-door salesmen" or "street peddlers" instead of "in-house sales clerks" or "shopkeepers." Part of their work then became taking a list of programs with

them into the neighborhoods to "advertise" and "sell" to residents, while helping residents develop their "shopping lists." One director recalled that the ICCC viewed the organizer as a sales agent of clubs and programs. An organizer said, "Directors took on COs because they think the COs are going to fill up the matnas." And a foundation offered to fund early CO work in order to bring those "unaccustomed to institutional activities" (e.g., school dropouts, returning soldiers, the unemployed) into the centers.

The activity of being-in-the-neighborhood, in other words, while meaning something different to each culture, could be accommodated within the metaphor.

On the other hand, while non-COs' reinterpretation of organizers' roles made sense to them in terms of the metaphor, it was not a comfortable fit for the COs themselves, for whom selling programs which had not emerged from local expressions of need continued to clash with their professional principles.

Although administrators' success in re-interpreting CO activity in light of the metaphor lessened their estrangement from the organizers, the latter continued to feel as though they were living in an alien, and sometimes hostile, culture. As directors pushed for organizers to conform to the implications of the metaphor, the clash between administrators and organizers deepened. In 1977, the Executive Director froze the budget and activities of the CO Division for a year and forbade them to meet for their annual in-service training sessions. He argued that there was too much "process," too much running around in the neighborhood. As the then Assistant Director said, "We need to see projects, activity groups, people inside the matnas" (emphasis added). The Executive Director subsequently did not rehire the CO Division Head. By 1981, only one of the original COs remained in the field (the only one without university-level training); two others had become regional CO supervisors following a national reorganization. CO practice within the agency

remained uncertain up until the Executive Director's untimely death in 1984. His successor, the former Assistant Director, was perceived by COs as more favorably disposed to the idea of professional CO practice using the centers as a base of operations. Unlike the founding Director, the successor had not been involved in the adoption of the supermarket metaphor; he joined the agency later, on his return from graduate studies in the U.S. where he had had some CO-related training and exposure to American community centers.

### **Metaphors, Tacit Knowledge, and Organizational Learning**

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty,  
"which is to be master -- that's all."

The ICCC in its founding period needed to create its identity as an organization, both externally -- to attract sources of funding, to rally supportive publics, to attract clients -- and internally -- to design and construct buildings, to formulate programs, to develop staff, to evaluate progress. The task was complicated by the fact that neither the American "community center" nor the newly coined "matnas" represented widely familiar concepts. Into this void the metaphor of community center-as-supermarket was introduced and grew. It suggested a way of thinking about matnas programs, buildings, and staff that allowed the organization to get on with business. It provided a way of developing categories of appropriate and inappropriate action. What worked was what fit the metaphor.

The metaphor juxtaposed the supermarket with the community center/matnas. It brought the greater detail of a more familiar concept together with a fuzzier notion, and in the interaction of the two created a way of seeing the matnas and thinking about what it should be. The metaphor was not taken literally: no one ordered freezer cases instead of desks and chairs. But

agency members' understandings of the metaphor depended on a common literal sense of supermarkets.

For more than the first decade of the ICC's existence, the supermarket metaphor was an active figure of thought. It became an organizational metaphor. It was not the private musing of the founder who first uttered the phrase, nor was it restricted to the domain of the Board of Directors where it was initially expressed. It was available throughout the organization to members of the Board, agency executives, and center directors and staff, and to any member of the public who read agency brochures released at that time or attended discussions at Annual Meetings.

The metaphor was unexamined. It was introduced in a moment of metaphoric insight, and once on the table, it guided thought and action tacitly. No one said, "I think a community center is like a supermarket." Neither did anyone play out the metaphor after it was introduced by asking, "In what ways is a matnas like a supermarket?" Aspects of appropriate supermarket behaviors were known and learned tacitly. They were available first to the agency's founders, Board members, and Executive Director, who initially adopted and used the metaphor. The knowledge about how centers were like supermarkets -- a piece of cultural organizational learning (Cook and Yanow, 1990) -- was passed on tacitly to center directors by the Executive Director when he hired them, through the Training Program for new directors and later in-service training sessions, or through conversations with other staff.

Tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966) of what it meant for the matnas to be a supermarket, and of the implications for their roles, was passed on to the COs primarily in daily interactions with their organizational superiors, the matnas directors. It was in these conversations that the behavioral expectations dictated by the metaphor and the actions mandated by norms of CO professional

practice came into contact and clashed. While the clash was palpable, the underlying framework of knowledge provided by the metaphor was not. No one said to the community organizers, "You need to be inside the matnas building because supermarket personnel don't work outside." No one said, "You can't meet residents in their apartments because shoppers always come into the supermarket." A director might have asked, "Where were you yesterday afternoon between 4 and 6 o'clock? Why weren't you here in the office?" In replying, "I was meeting the Edri family and their neighbors in Green Street park," the CO would perhaps open a conversation in which the different expectations of behavior could be voiced. But all this would be done without explicit reference to supermarkets.

The conflict that developed between COs and management was not due to improper program design or improper behavior on the part of the organizers (the point of view at times of some ICCC administrators); nor was it due to unprofessional practice (the self-doubting view of the organizers themselves, and sometimes of their supervisors in the CO division); nor to mismanagement by center directors of their staff in any traditional sense (some COs' point of view). It can be explained, rather, in terms of the implications for action of an extended, unexamined organizational metaphor that, while enabling thought and action of one sort, nonetheless ruled out traditional CO thought and action which were incompatible with it. The conflict was played out in everyday organizational life, but the reason underlying the conflict was never understood because it lay in an unexamined metaphor.

Professionals and administrators within the same organization often clash (see, e.g., Raelin, 1986). However, had the ICCC hired MBAs, for example, rather than COs, such clash is less likely to have occurred, since the norms of MBA training and practice are closer to the retailing practices implicit in the

supermarket metaphor. Without the supermarket metaphor, there would not have been a clear, if unspoken, conceptual model for acceptable staff behavior which the COs were not living up to, and the clash between them and administrators might have been more diffuse. As Bennis (1972, pp. 104-5) notes, "Metaphors have tremendous power ... to give life and meaning to what was formerly perceived only dimly and imprecisely. What did students experience before Erikson's 'identity crisis'?"

It is difficult to know whether the supermarket metaphor determined the solution to the problem of defining the nature of the community centers/matnasim, or whether tacit knowledge of the desired solution determined the choice of metaphor. Schon (1979), adopting a medical metaphor in his own analysis, argues that the diagnosis of the organizational problem is made first, determining the selection of a metaphor, and the metaphor-diagnosis embodies the prescription for subsequent action. The choice of a particular metaphor, however, could just as well devolve from some prior, although tacit, and perhaps vague, notion of what the solution should be, and an equally tacit search for a conceptual vehicle to shape that abstraction. In this way, metaphors may be both models of and models for a situation.

#### **Why a Supermarket? Making Metaphors Explicit**

"The light which puts out our eyes  
is darkness to us." -- Thoreau, Walden

Metaphor's epistemological role is both to enable new insights and to blind us to other relationships which might be germane to the subject at hand. The capacity of metaphors to blind has been seen by many as a pitfall of metaphor and as an argument that metaphors should therefore be eliminated or that unexamined metaphors should be made explicit. These arguments have been

made with respect to both practice (Krefting and Frost, 1985; D. F. Miller, 1985; Schon, 1979) and theory (Keeley, 1980; Pinder and Bourgeois, 1982). Pinder and Bourgeois (1982, p. 647), for example, argue that we should strive to control metaphoric language in organizational studies, because it is "important to formulate concepts in literal terms rooted in observable organizational phenomena." The following comments address the issue as it pertains to administrative practice.

Arguments that metaphors should be eliminated or made explicit echo earlier positions in philosophy and literary criticism which held that metaphoric language is mere ornamentation not integral to thought. If it is not integral to thought, metaphor can be eliminated in favor of literal language without altering the underlying cognitions of the organizational situation. The argument about whether or not metaphor can be replaced by literal language cannot be resolved by appeal to fact; as Morgan (1983) and Bourgeois and Pinder (1983) have noted elsewhere, the debate rests on differing epistemological and ontological assumptions. But we can spell out the implications of this debate for making metaphors explicit or substituting other metaphors for them.

There are those who appreciate the epistemological role of metaphors and do not argue for eliminating them but who do seem to argue for illuminating the blind spots -- that is, replacing some metaphors with others or making metaphors explicit. Keeley (1980) and Schon (1979), for example, propose to replace overused or conventional metaphors with less worn ones. Weick (1979) suggests using other metaphors to fill in what the initial metaphor blinds us to. This appears to be a variation on the traditional substitution theory -- replacing one metaphor with another instead of with literal language.

Suggesting that metaphors may be replaced by other metaphors tends to

treat metaphors once again as adornments; it undervalues the intimate connection between metaphor and cognition. Metaphors can no more be replaced by a different metaphor than they can by literal language without changing human perception and understanding of the metaphor's context. Furthermore, while replacing metaphors with other metaphors may be an attempt to eliminate (or reduce) blind spots, such replacement, as D. F. Miller (1985) notes, does not avoid the pitfalls associated with metaphor use. It simply replaces the blind spots of one metaphor with those of another. And, it is not evident that cumulations of metaphors will make sight blindingly clear.

Making metaphors explicit similarly treats them as superfluous entities. As with proposing a replacement, to spell out the implications of a metaphor is, first of all, to label the idea "a metaphor" and, secondly, to make explicit that which until then had remained at the level of tacit knowledge. This raises some concerns. Organizational metaphors may arise at times of organizational vulnerability, such as when members are facing a puzzle which they are unprepared or unwilling to address explicitly. Naming an organizational concept a metaphor and spelling out its implications would unmask the agency at a time when, as Schein (1985) has noted, it has no defense mechanisms to protect itself. Or, of concern to public agencies, it risks making public, policy goals implemented by the agency which are known tacitly, and yet for which public support is not explicit.

The first part of the ICC case illustrates the power of metaphor to direct thought and shape action in a fashion which was beneficial to the organization. This might lead us to encourage administrators and others to undertake metaphoric thinking purposefully and intentionally with an eye to solving organizational problems, as indicated in Smith and Simmons (1983) or as Schon (1979) suggests with respect to policy analysis.

The second part of the case carries an even stronger implication that metaphors should be made explicit. It illustrates the power of metaphor to constrain thought and rule out alternative courses of action, leading to organizational conflict to the detriment of one or more members or groups of members, or perhaps to the organization as a whole. The implication is that making the metaphor explicit or replacing it with another -- seeing the community center as "a functional department store," or a library, or even a synagogue -- would have eliminated the conflict between administrators and COs.

There are, perhaps, objective reasons why none of these possibilities came about; department stores, for example, were unknown in Israel at that time. But the important thing to note is that the metaphor was created, in a moment of serendipity, by a member of the organization -- not by a third party -- and it sprang full-blown out of existing organizational values. That is, as a model of the situation, the metaphor reflected some pre-existing cognition of what was desired in a community center, at the same time that it was a model for and directed further thought and action once it was expressed and accepted as an organizational metaphor.

To suggest that "supermarket" be replaced by "department store", or any other metaphor, in order to eliminate conflict is to ignore the fact that metaphors are embedded in a cognitive context particular to a time and place. An artifact of the agency's culture, the supermarket metaphor reflected part of the agency's tacitly known values and beliefs. One of these was that its goal was to enable clients to adopt Western, middle-class values and behaviors -- although this was a "verboden goal", a policy goal which is not and often cannot be articulated explicitly, because it is not supported by explicit public consensus (Yanow, 1991). The supermarket metaphor gave expression to this verboden goal through a vehicle which itself embodied Western, middle

class values and behaviors -- the literal supermarket -- and, by extension, through the specific programs offered by the matnas-as- supermarket (e.g., ballet, string quartets, etc.). The metaphor was particularly appropriate to the situation: the supermarket, itself an American concept and called in Hebrew by its English word, had first appeared in Israel a few years prior to the founding of the ICCC. It was perceived as belonging to a higher socioeconomic status in a way that traditional groceries and open air markets were not. The metaphor fit a social service agenda, itself rooted in the American experience, for establishing programs in lower class areas to attract non-European residents to the Western middle class way of life which the supermarket represented. The context required a vehicle that would express these tacitly-held values; "library," "synagogue" or some other metaphor might not have made this possible.

Furthermore, making the supermarket metaphor explicit would have entailed addressing the problems of operationalizing a "broad-aim program" (Weiss and Rein, 1969). The metaphor allows a certain operational ambiguity and flexibility: low "turnover" of one product-program need not imply organizational failure; if one program doesn't "sell" well, the matnas-as-supermarket as a whole isn't threatened -- the director can "open up shelf space" for other products. There is no conceptual limit to the number of items a community center-as-supermarket can offer, unlike a youth center, whose offerings are limited by age suitability, or a sports center, which is limited by program type. The advantage of such ambiguity to the community center/supermarket is flexibility; the disadvantage is ever-changing, largely unattainable goals. Both are seen in the list of the ICCC's goals over its first decade of operations, ranging from providing "someplace to go" to "narrowing the social gap" to providing "quality of life." Defining success in

terms of attendance rates provides an organizational goal far more concrete and measurable than these broader, more ambiguous social goals. As a model of the social policy context which created the ICCC, the supermarket metaphor reflected tacit knowledge about the agency's verboten goals, knowledge which was also communicated tacitly by way of the metaphor. One might argue, therefore, that there are times when metaphors should not be made explicit because doing so might surface for general scrutiny deeply held assumptions which the organization has not chosen to make public or which the polity is not yet prepared to discuss.

The ICCC might have spelled out the implications of the metaphor for administrative and CO practice, as has been done here; but we cannot know for certain that this would have eliminated the conflict. Such an argument is based on the assumption that the metaphor caused the conflict. This causal relationship might hold if metaphors were only models for perception; but as they may also be models of perception, then in giving voice to prior cognitions they are not causes, and eliminating them may only leave the cognition to be expressed in some other form, thereby continuing the conflict through other means. Moreover, making the supermarket metaphor explicit is not the only way the conflict might have been resolved. It is equally plausible that in changing its way of thinking about its work -- under a new Director's different vision, for example -- the agency might have given rise to a new metaphor which would have articulated this new cognition, possibly replacing or reinterpreting the supermarket metaphor and its implications for action.

The ICCC case is an unusual example in that it illustrates both aspects of the epistemological role of metaphor: the enabling and the limiting. In light of the concerns raised here, the limiting potential of organizational metaphors should not be taken by administrators as a call to eliminate or replace them or

to make them and their implications explicit. Metaphors are not only word play.

To conclude on a philosophical note: the points of view expressed in this article derive from an interpretive position. From this position two features are particularly salient. First, metaphors are seen as part of the culture of the organization. This means that while the metaphoric phrase itself is a visible and accessible artifact -- "a functional supermarket" is printed in agency literature; it is not private or hidden knowledge -- it rests on and derives its meaning from values and beliefs which are specific to the context of a particular organization. It can only be understood -- interpreted -- in that context. We would not expect to find "supermarket" used metaphorically in other organizations, although we might find other metaphors playing a similar epistemological role.

Second, from an interpretive position one cannot argue that metaphors should never be made explicit any more than one can maintain that they always should be made explicit. That depends on the particular context of a particular organization. Human judgment, administrative judgment, must be made.

## Notes

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1. The extent of interest in metaphor as a field of analysis may be seen by looking at two bibliographies published in the last two decades. Shibles (1971) included 3000 annotated entries on the subject of metaphor. Van Noppen, deKnop, and Jongen (1985) cited 4300 new entries not included in Shibles' work, most of them published between the early 1970s and 1985. Commenting on a set of papers for a symposium on metaphor in 1978, Booth (1978) wrote, "The bibliographies show ...that the year 1977 produced more titles than the entire history of thought [about metaphor] before 1940."

2. Humpty Dumpty and Alice quotations are from Lewis Carroll, *Alice's adventures in wonderland and through the looking glass*, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968, pages 267-283 passim.

3. Definitions of metaphor, according to Black (1962), have taken one of three approaches to seeing what they are and how they work: as substitution, in which the metaphor takes the place of some equivalent literal formulation; as comparison, in which the metaphor, seen as an abbreviated simile, could be filled in to spell out the comparison being made between its two parts; and as interaction, in which some unnoticed aspect(s) of the focal object of the metaphor is highlighted through an interaction between the two parts of the

metaphor, leading to a new understanding of the metaphor's focus. The definition suggested here is in the latter tradition.

4. Such figures have been called "dead" metaphors, but as Lakoff (1987) points out, this is a holdover from the view of metaphors as figures of speech rather than of thought. As a figure of speech, metaphor referred only to a novel expression; an analogy which had become commonplace and lost its novelty was considered dead. But, as the inflation metaphor illustrates, even common sense metaphors do not necessarily lose their ability to direct perception. The original meaning of inflation is still available to us in the context of economic thought, although more often under the rubric of "over-inflation," when economic policy is developed to apply cold compresses to the swelling or to prick a hole in the balloon and let the air out. See Lakoff and Johnson (1980) for further discussion of conventional and "dead" metaphors.

5. This is what Turner (1974) called "multivocality" -- the capacity to resonate among many meanings at once, like a chord in music is a resonating of many tones. While this is true from an analytic point of view, it may not always be so in practice. As is shown in the present case, the organizational metaphor held only one meaning for each organizational division, and the actions of each division implied by those meanings were largely incompatible. That does not mean that some other organization could not have found a way to reconcile the differences, which would have made the metaphor multivocal in that situation in practice as well as in theory.

6. As noted in the concluding paragraphs of this essay, the arguments presented here rest on an interpretive or social constructivist approach to

what constitutes reality, knowledge, and methodology. A positivist or non-constructivist is more likely to search for a "final" meaning underlying a metaphor, believing as they do in the possibility of discovering a single objective truth. From a constructivist point of view, the possibility of reinterpretation always exists. Moreover, a literal meaning need not necessarily ever have been constructed "beneath" a metaphor. This difference of approach lies at the heart of the debate over whether metaphors can be eliminated in favor of literal language. Some of the substance of this debate within organizational studies is captured in the exchange between Morgan (1983) and Bourgeois and Pinder (1983).

7. This case is based on three years of participant observation from 1972-1975, followed in 1980-81 by six months of further observation, interviews, and document analysis. The analysis represents the interpretation of the author and does not imply endorsement by the ICCC.

8. The discussion about the religious implications of the word community does not hold for the few Christian and Moslem towns and neighborhoods which were also designated to receive ICCC services. The original study excluded these sites for reasons of language and access; they are not included in the present analysis.

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## Two Models of Community Center/Matnas Action

Ramifications of the supermarket  
metaphor for Community Center action

Implications of CO practice  
for Community Center action

### I. Implications for building design

distinctive, non-vernacular, large-scale,  
spacious architectural design; central  
location; 2 storeys; high ceilings;  
many, multi-purpose rooms; display  
areas and cases

multiple small-scale,  
neighborhood-based, Clubhouse-  
type buildings; design resembles  
local residential architecture  
(small rooms, common materials,  
low ceilings)

### II. Implications for merchandise

large variety of programs  
(sports, Adult, Youth, language,  
arts, dance, music), centrally  
designed, "out of a box"

small number of programs, unique  
to local context, according to  
local needs

### III. Implications for administrative, CO, and staff roles

director sits in office, waits  
for calls, visitors; manages books  
and paper, talks on telephone

"MBWA;" director goes out to  
meet residents, social service  
counterparts

staff (including COs) work inside,  
"sell" programs to clients who enter  
the building; or COs peddle Center  
programs outside the building

COs and other staff do "street  
work" to determine local needs  
for programs, evaluate success  
of CO efforts

IV. Implications for evaluative measures

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| - # of programs offered                            | residents take leadership roles   |
| - # of attendants per program                      | in determining Center programs,   |
| - # of people coming inside building               | place demands on Center rather  |
| - membership figures                               | than depending on Center to   |
| - per capita cost of programs                      | initiate offerings; evaluate in   |
| - requests for many different programs,<br>classes | terms of extent of residents'<br>involvement, initiative,<br>leadership |

V. Implications for client roles

comes into the building to register  
for Center-initiated offerings

requests activities in local  
neighborhood, rather than in  
central building

asks for tutoring for children,  
after school child-care, other  
programs which Center has not  
initiated but which articulate  
client's needs