Symbols as a Language of Organizational Relationships

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The constantly changing and tenuous nature of organizations is complicating the relationships between individuals and organizations. We argue that physical symbols offer individuals and organizations access to a rich, non-verbal “language” that can help clarify this relational complexity. We advance physical symbols to be a mechanism for managing two key aspects of relationships – identity and status, and offer suggestions for better understanding, and even enhancing the use of these symbols in modern management.

Treating physical symbols as a language helps us comprehend their versatility and their ability to represent and maintain relationships. It also advances the argument that some changes in relationships are often realized via physical symbols. These two less discussed aspects of symbols are the premise of our chapter. We examine the language offered by physical symbols, in light of what is currently known about verbal language, and highlight the relational messages that can be communicated by this language. We suggest that the language of physical symbols can and should be analyzed because it is prevalent, powerful, and can easily be misinterpreted. We also offer suggestions for avoiding or correcting misinterpretations.

PHYSICAL SYMBOLS IN ORGANIZATIONS: AN OVERVIEW

The dictionary definition of symbol is “something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance” (Webster’s Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary: 892). Building on this definition, symbols can be physical objects or artifacts, individual or groups behaviors, as well as verbal expressions (cf. Jones, 1996; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Mitroff & Kilmann, 1976; Morgan, Frost, & Pondy, 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1984, 1993). Within this broad view we focus here on physical symbols, or objects. Our premise is that physical objects are in themselves elements of a language that plays a key role in helping individuals and organizational collectives enact their relationships.

We specifically focus on physical symbols because they are omnipresent and tangible and
have the potential to involve all of our physical senses including sight, smell, and touch. The engagement of multiple senses gives physical symbols the potential to be psychologically engaging in ways not previously recognized by organizational scholars. Moreover, we believe physical symbols to be a psychologically "safe" vehicle for enacting potentially abstract and threatening organizational issues. To illustrate, in an earlier paper we have shown that both individual and organizations may found it easier to manipulate and discuss dress than to discuss their organization's identity (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997: 889).

Listed in Table 1 are four types of physical symbols that we suggest individual and organizational actors use. The assumed target of the use of any such symbols is a set of other people who bear a relationship to the actor -- an audience. Table 1 cannot exhaust all symbols used in and by organizations, but it captures the physical symbols that have received focused attention by organizational scholars: (1) dress and personal adornment (cf., Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993); (2) physical landscape and office design (cf., Becker & Steele, 1995; Oldham & Brass, 1979; Oldham & Rotchford, 1983; Sundstrom, 1986); (3) technology (cf., Owens & Sutton, 1999); and (4) dramaturgical props (cf., Goffman, 1959; Brissett & Edgeley, 1990).
We assume that both individuals and collectives – such as organizations – can and do use symbols. We specifically focus on such use at a meso-level, that is in communication regarding relationships between individuals and organizations (House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995; Chatman, 1989; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982). Our analysis, therefore, considers the messages of physical symbols in which individuals are actors and organizations are the audience or vice versa.

We also suggest that the different types of physical symbols noted or implied by Table 1 differ on at least two dimensions: instrumentality and portability. **Instrumentality** refers to the usefulness, or explicit task-fulfilling properties of a symbol above and beyond its symbolic value. Thus, a diploma is less instrumental than a laptop computer because the latter may help process documents, analyze data, or send e-mail, in addition to being a signal of high status. **Portability** refers to the ease with which a physical symbol can be carried or transported. Thus, a company t-shirt would be considered a more portable symbol than a physical building, such as the basket-shaped headquarters of the Longaberger Corporation (www.longaberger.com/library/office.phtml).

The symbols listed in Table 1 are arranged in Figure 1 into four quadrants according to our assessments of their instrumentality and portability. The graphic depiction of Figure 1 denotes that the differences between any two quadrants are continuous rather than dichotomous. Thus, symbols can vary in the extent to which they are portable and / or instrumental. These notions of instrumentality and portability play a key role in understanding how symbol use in organizations may change in modern organizations.

**PHYSICAL SYMBOLS AS A LANGUAGE OF MODERN ORGANIZATIONS: UNDERSTANDING RELATIONAL TENSIONS**

Our key argument -- that physical symbols are important to understanding relationships between individuals and organizations -- is particularly important because of the changing and
increasingly abstract and tenuous nature of such relationships. A set of “classic” relational issues or tensions is made salient in modern organizational contexts. Notably issues of identity and status take on new meaning as novel organizational forms evolve. We argue that a new way of viewing physical symbols – one that sees them as a language – is critical for understanding and managing these issues or tensions. Our analysis therefore rests on two basic assertions that we present next: (a) that physical symbols can be used as language; and (b) that this language expresses and enacts relationships between individuals and collectives.

**Physical Symbols as a Language**

That physical symbols can be used as a form of communication is hardly new. The adage, “one picture is worth a 1,000 words,” points to the implicit understanding that objects convey a rich set of meanings. Morgan (1985: 29) notes, “Symbols provide the medium through which we communicate and engage our realities.” However available discussions of non-verbal communication are primarily descriptive, and provide limited analytic frameworks or tools for designing or testing hypotheses. Explicitly positioning physical symbols as a language that organizational members speak allows us to draw upon theory and research on language use and verbal discourse in organizations. Such extrapolation facilitates the understanding of the use of physical symbols as a form of communication by yielding three critical parallels between verbal language and physical symbols: (1) Accepted elements and structure, (2) Socially constructed meaning, and (3) Actively constructing meaning.

1. **Accepted elements and structure**

   The concept of language is premised on some consensual and meaningful arrangement of individual elements. Verbal languages are premised on acceptable combinations of letters, words, or sentences, utterances and moves. In a similar fashion physical symbols can be decomposed into individual elements. For example, elements of attire such as shirt, jacket, tie or shoes are individual elements that, when put together properly create an image, or ‘the sentence,’ of a suit. Individual physical symbols alone (e.g., a tie, a shirt, or a ring) can hold meaningful representations similar to elements of verbal speech. Just like verbal symbols, multiple physical
symbols can be put together to clarify, bolster, or qualify a point (Fromkin, Rodman, Collins, & Blair, 1988). Both the individual elements and the composite structure bear meanings (Austin, 1962; Tannen, 1981).

However, meanings of elements of the language of physical symbols, precisely like meanings of words, are also a product of how specific elements or utterances are put together, and how they unfold in a relationship (Tannen, 1986; 1995). The precise positioning and the actor using a word or an utterance define its meanings and its role in a relationship, and the messages it sends about a relationship. The sentence, “Jill hates Jack” has the same three words as the sentence “Jack hates Jill.” However, the placement of the words gives very different meanings. Similarly, a picture of an organizational chart that is shaped as a pyramid, and one shaped as an upside-down pyramid both contain the same basic elements (boxes and arrows linking people and positions) yet convey contradictory meanings. The former represents a hierarchy while the latter a more bottom-up company.

Finally, there is an assumed and expected “grammar” for language using symbols – or an expected pattern of combining elements into meaningful and coherent units. Learning a language, any language, comprises learning both the basic units of meaning –words—and the rules to combine these to form sentences. The rules constitute the grammar of a language. These rules are often known and accepted at an unconscious level, and may vary among social groups. But there must be shared knowledge regarding rules for speakers to talk to and understand each other (Fromkin, et al., 1988: 12). To illustrate, sentences must have verbs – you cannot have a sentence with only nouns. When we argue that a combination of elements (e.g., words or sentences) is “grammatical,” we mean that it is formed in keeping with the rules of a language.

A similar set of conventions accompanies physical symbols. Spatial layout of an office, for example, typically maintains implicit yet shared rules such as the chair is behind the desk, the bookcase does not block the door, and the telephone and the computer are not on the floor. A violation of these implicit rules is swiftly though often casually noted. Someone who places his chair with his back to the desk is likely to be assumed violating the rules. Similarly, CEO’s sitting
in open cubicles rather than in corner offices on the top floor are seen as “weird” or “different.” Such violations in “grammar” may be corrected, or they may come to be adopted as new rules, much as “slang” or “jargon” can become incorporated into a verbal language.

2. Socially constructed meaning

As with verbal language, the meanings of physical symbols are socially constructed. \textit{Social groups infuse physical symbols with meanings}, just like they infuse verbal terms and concepts with meanings (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Individuals may assume that the meaning they ascribe to a symbol is the objective meaning, but there is no objective meaning as all meanings are socially ascribed. The word ‘bank,’ for example, has no inherent relationship to a place where people deposit their money or take out loans, though most English speakers share this meaning.

Tannen (1986; 1990; 1995) further suggests that conversational style is a product of social background, and that the assumption that meanings are objective and clear is a precursor to many misunderstandings. This is true both with verbal symbols and with physical symbols. Gifts given, for example, can come to be interpreted as meaning a family relationship. Moch and Huff, (1983: 301) describe an incident where a firm disallowed the giving of gifts to pregnant workers. For one worker, the absence of gifts meant that the firm was no longer like a family

\begin{quotation}
This place has lost the family atmosphere it used to have …if a woman got pregnant [it used to be] you couldn’t carry the gifts out the door.
\end{quotation}

However, both gifts and the lack of gifts may be interpreted in many ways – not just as the end of the “organization as family.” Gifts to a pregnant woman, for example, may be viewed as a form of paternalism that is out of place in a work setting, and the stopping of such a ritual may be an attempt to eliminate such constructions.

The meanings ascribed to a verbal or physical element influence the way the element is thought of, treated, and used. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest, for example, that the metaphor “time is money” influences how members of Western society think and speak of time (“to save time”, “to spend your time” etc.). Similarly, images of a physical symbol influence how it is spoken of and how it is used. To illustrate, Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) found that some nurses
resented a movement to initiate uniforms as their dress code because they associated it with autocratic and militaristic treatment. The resentment was not of the functional qualities of the uniform, but rather to what uniforms have come to symbolize -- autocratic and military settings.

The socially constructed meaning of physical symbols leads to several social dynamics surrounding such symbols that again reinforce the similarity between physical and verbal symbols. First, the use of both verbal and physical symbols is a routine activity that is taken for granted and conducted (often automatically and unconsciously) by organizational members. People do not think of ‘talking’ or using verbal language as an intentional or special activity, even though talking is a central element of organizing (Boden, 1995; cf. Fine, 1996; Schegloff, 1991; Shotter, 1993). Similarly, speaking through physical symbols is often done continuously, routinely, and almost automatically, as an activity that is inherent to organized operations. Such symbolic ‘speaking’ does not necessarily rely upon active thought.

Second, both verbal and physical symbols can come to represent multiple meanings. One symbol can have different meanings in different contexts. Thus, the word, “top,” can designate a location (on top of the table), or a toy. Similarly an American flag flying over a plant in the United States may have a very different meaning if this flag is flown over a plant in Iran or in Poland.

Third, both verbal and physical symbols can deliver explicit messages about both the meaning of the symbol itself, as well as meta-messages that provide information about the relations among the people involved (O’Connor, 1994). For example, a white smock worn by an individual communicates multiple messages: a direct message that the individual wearing the smock is a member of the medical profession, and a meta-message that the individual can tell others what to do (pull up your sleeve or completely undress, open your mouth, or let me pierce you with a needle and extract your blood). Moch and Huff (1983) elaborate how power in organizations is largely enacted through such meta-messages embedded in verbal and non-verbal language, rather than through legitimate organizational structures.

Fourth, the intent of an actor using a symbol can be misunderstood. There is increased recognition of misunderstandings of verbal discourse in organizations. Tannen’s (1986, 1994)
work claims that geographic, social, or demographic background determines how verbal statements are presented, and how they are interpreted, understood, or misunderstood. Less is known about, but clearly the same is true with physical (non-verbal) symbols. Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail and Macki-Lewis (1997), for example, found that employees wearing a suit because they wanted to convey responsibility and accountability were sometimes seen by others as being presumptuous or ambitious. Meanings ascribed to a physical symbol can also cause actors (individuals or organizations) to lose sight of other potential meanings. Thus, organizations introducing open space architecture because of its association with open and informal communication may overlook interpretations of the same spatial layout as representing infringement into individual privacy.

3. Actively constructing meaning

Like the setting on a stage, symbols help construct the content of an ensuing social setting (Goffman, 1959). Thus, physical symbols, like spoken language, are not only socially constructed; they also, in turn, shape reality. Boden (1995:8) describes how verbal language is an ongoing, routine activity that is central to the construction of organizations. She notes, “When people come together in organizations to get things done, they talk … [talk] shapes and is shaped by the structure of the organization itself.”

In a similar manner, the use of physical symbols by organizational members continuously creates and recreates the organization. Davis (1984) and Pfeffer (1982) describe how constructing walls, and defining divisions and subdivisions among parts of an organizational office define the construed social structure of the organization. Likewise, Jones (1996) suggests that symbols express and create routine organizational structures and processes. More broadly, the dramaturgical framework suggested by Goffman, (1959) and developed by Brissett & Edgley, (1990) positions symbols as a part of the staging that is essential to the drama of everyday life. To illustrate Duffy (1969: 11 as cited in Sundstrom, 1986: 239) notes how architectural arrangements are used to “set the proper stage” for the office of the Deputy Secretary of the British Civil Service:
[The Deputy Secretary needs] the pedestal table to browbeat a clerk, the side table to serve sherry to visitors, the interview chair to hint around a delicate matter for the benefit of an inquisitive journalist, the curtains to make the room feel warmer, the tiles in the glass-fronted bookcase to remind his critics of certain claims to culture.

The dynamic and constant quality of communication via physical symbols necessarily and continuously impacts social relations and interactions. Such impact may, however, take on multiple forms, as described below.

**Physical Symbols Enact Relationships**

Relationships occur when social actors are interdependent, so that their thoughts, feelings, and actions are “mutually and causally interconnected” (Clark and Reiss, 1988: 611). That physical symbols enact relationships is endemic to the origin of the concept of symbol as described by Strati (1998: 1387):

*[A symbol] reveals the construction of a relationship between two subjects. At its origin … lies the ancient Greek custom of giving a departing guest one half of a broken tile so that in the future, by rejoining the two broken halves, the guest and his/her descendants will be recognized and the hospitality renewed. (Emphasis ours)*

Our assertion here is that physical symbols – like spoken language – help to communicate parameters of a relationship between two or more objects/actors. Further, drawing from insights from work on symbolism, relationships, and self-categorization theory, we argue that physical symbols help to establish relationship parameters by communicating similarities and differences among partners to the relationship. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) note that actors send two basic types of messages to people with whom they have a relationship: differentiation messages and integration messages. That is, actors can use symbols either to reveal how the actor and his or her audience are different or to reveal how they are similar. In a similar vein, Hinde’s (1997) review and analysis of relationships suggests that one fundamental way of thinking about how things relate is considering their degree of similarity and dissimilarity (see also, Berscheid, 1994). Research on categorization processes confirms that individuals organize social fields into things that are alike and those that are not alike (cf., Hogg, 1996; Hogg, Terry, &

Language – in the form of spoken words or physical symbols -- enacts such categorization through the provision of labels (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997). Thus, physical symbols provide more than a means to communicate similarities or distinctions. They provide actors a means for framing social situations. Social actors involved in a labeling process can use physical symbols to construct a cognitive frame that will guide how others interpret and guide the actor, the situation, and the relationship involved. Thus, donning a UPS uniform not only communicates your membership in that organization, it also influences how others in the organization treat you (e.g., as an “insider” not an “outsider”).

This categorization and labeling process is dynamic, simultaneously involving both actor and audience. There is reciprocation in the use of symbols, as there is with words. Verbal conversations include initiating moves, responding moves, and follow up moves. Coulthard and Ashby (1975) illustrate this with conversations between patients and doctors, and Firth (1995) illustrates this with telephone conversations referring to the process as one of ‘negotiation.’ Similarly, physical symbols can be engaged as initiating moves – presenting novel or initial information regarding an issue or a relationship. Goffman (1967:54) notes how wedding rings are engaged to symbolize a serious (engagement) relationship:

It is understood that a small investment in an engagement ring, as such investments go, may mean that the man places a small value on his finances as these things go, even though no one may believe that women and things are commensurate things. In the organizational realm, Locke (1996) beautifully illustrates such moves by showing how physicians use physical props (e.g., a stethoscope with funny animals clinging to it) as initiating moves that elicit particular responses (e.g., positive emotions) in patients and families. Locke (1996) suggests that these physical props help increase trust between and among social actors in a hospital, strengthening their relationship.
What is it about relationships that physical symbols enact? Dimensions offered for analyzing interpersonal relationships -- a love-hate dimension and a dominance-submission dimension (Hinde, 1997; Strong, et al. 1988; Wiggins, 1982) -- suggest two central elements of relationships between individuals and organizations: identity and status. Identity, especially social identity, contains elements of attraction or distancing similar to love or hate (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Status, by contrast, represents similarities and differences in dominance and submission in the relations between individuals and organizations.

In the following section, we explore in greater detail how symbols can be used as a language for enacting identity and status aspects of individual-organizational relationships. Our analysis leads to our assessment of trends in the use of symbols. Namely, given evolving changes in organizational relationships we expect changes in the types of physical symbols used (e.g., a shift towards more portable symbols), and in what these symbols represent (e.g. a shift to equalization of status symbols, and to symbols conveying more complex identity messages such as ambivalence).

SYMBOLS AS A LANGUAGE FOR STATUS AND IDENTITY ISSUES IN RELATIONSHIPS

Three key insights offered by the view of physical symbols as a language inform our analysis of symbols as conveyors of identity and status issues. First, language is reciprocal and dynamic. For a language, any language, to be understood, at least two parties need to construct and interpret the linguistic elements. Thus, the language of physical symbols can only be understood in terms of interactions among entities. This view of symbols as reciprocal and dynamic is missing in many extant treatments. Studies often view symbols as adjectives – or descriptors of the kind of person or organization the symbol bearer is. Thus, a CEO who uses an expensive car or wears an expensive suit is claimed to be powerful. Yet the use of a symbol is meaningless if there is no audience to the initiating move. The CEO driving an expensive car or wearing an expensive suit is not powerful when surrounded by others wearing the same suit or driving the same car. It is when people recognize the value of the symbol (e.g., because they do not have it) that power is
communicated through it. So the audience, and the impact of the symbol on this audience, is critical to understanding the message sent by the symbol. Hence, the language framework suggests that symbols are more like verbs than adjectives. They communicate an action, or impact of one actor (a sender) on another actor (the audience) \( (\text{Jones}, 1996) \).

Second, language has both parts and wholes. It is not necessarily individual words or individual physical symbols that communicate a message. Both individual symbols (which are equivalent to individual “words”) and combinations of symbols (which are equivalent to sentences) have their own meaning, and communicate a relationship message. Thus, the study of symbols needs to go beyond discrete treatment of the meaning of individual symbols to looking at patterns of symbols. It is primarily such patterns that communicate more complex ideas about relationships between individuals and organizations.

Third, language is socially constructed. Because the meaning of language is socially constructed, the context of an organization in which a symbol is used is critical to understanding the relationship the symbol depicts. Different communities may ascribe different meanings to physical symbols. This makes it important both to concentrate on how misunderstandings occur, and to seek ways for resolving miscommunication problems. These three lessons are the foundation of our argument, below, that symbols communicate identity and status aspects of an individual-organizational relationship.

**Symbols and Identity**

**Current theory and findings**

The link between one’s sense of self and one’s artifacts has a long intellectual history. William James (1890: 177) noted more than a century ago:

> A man's Self is the sum total of all he CAN call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and yacht.... [Emphasis ours.]

James eloquently illustrated how individuals chose symbols that come to represent them, such
their dress or their dwelling. Belk (1988) later contended that physical objects may be viewed as a type of “extended self” or as extensions of an individual’s self-conceptualization; and Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) noted that objects not only extend the self, but are also used to create the self (see also McCarthy, 1984; Prelinger, 1959). Similarly, symbols have long been used to reflect the identities of organizations, as evident in analyses of logos and architectural design (Sproull, 1981; Sundstrom, 1986). vi

Within organizations, physical symbols have most often been used to depict organizational identifying by individual members, and assimilating by organizations. Individuals wearing an organizational pin or uniform have been viewed as embracing, or identifying with organizational values (James, 1890; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). Such individual action with physical symbols illustrates the use of symbol “verbs” to communicate a congruence of values (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; Pratt, 1998). vii Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) empirically documented how dress accomplishes identifying. viii In their study of a hospital rehabilitation unit, nurses used non-medical ‘street clothes’ to signal allegiance to the historically dominant organizational identity of rehabilitation care. Similarly, Cialdini and colleagues’ (1976) described students using school attire to “bask in the reflected glory” of — or to identify with — winning athletic teams representing their academic institution. Similar to dress, individuals can adopt office color schemes, posters, or other physical symbols to connote identification with an organization. Service employees don name-tags that identify them with an organization (Rafaeli, 1989a; Shamir, 1980), or drive cars on which the company logo or color (e.g., pink) is boldly imprinted (Ash, 1984). ix

When viewing organizations as actors, the traditional view has been to show how symbols are used in assimilating members by communicating an expectation that individual symbols will mirror organizational values and beliefs. In this case employees are the presumed (and somewhat
passive) receivers. An example of assimilating is when organizations allow only their own physical objects in workers’ office spaces (Sommer, 1974: 111). Coombs (1977: 69 as cited in Sundstrom, 1986: 220) illustrates this point:

The authorities [at the Blue Cross/ Blue Shield corporate headquarters] request that every desk be cleared. Everyone must use the same sort of filing cabinets, the same waste-paper baskets. No posters are allowed. No photographs.

Another example is the organizational control of dress (e.g., uniforms), make up, hairstyles, and general appearance of employees (Joseph, 1986; Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild (1983: 103) notes that by standardizing employee appearance, companies seemingly communicate to their constituents that they have strong control of their workers -- and by extension, have the potential to provide high quality service.

Assimilation occurs as members respond to existing organizational symbols by complying with organizational identity standards (see Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993 for a discussion of the psychology of organizational dress). Lurie (1981: 18) makes this point starkly:

No matter what sort of uniform it is -- military, civil, or religious...to put on such livery is to give up one's right to act as an individual...What one does, as well as what one wears, will be determined by external authorities -- to a greater or lesser degree, depending on whether one is, for example, a Trappist monk or a boy scout.

In this vein, individuals donning prison guard uniforms reportedly told White and Zimbardo (1981), “Once you put on that uniform, then you are certainly not the same person. You really become that role.”

Changes in symbol use due to the changing context of modern organizations

Evolution in the nature and dynamics of organizations suggests that individuals will have a need to communicate more than identification messages and that organizations will need to communicate more than assimilation messages. This is because changes in the context of modern organizations intensify the classic tension between individuals’ needs to belong and needs to individuate (Brewer, 1991; Simmel, 1971; Collins, 1994).

The need to belong to a social group is a basic psychological need (Alderfer, 1972). Yet the
fulfillment of this need is challenged by emerging social trends, such as an increase in time spent outside formal work areas (cf. Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1996, 1998). With virtual teams and organizations, for example, the social aspect of working is becoming less tangible. With increases in telecommuting and customer service responsibilities, meetings and interactions with co-workers are becoming more and more scarce. What does it mean to belong to an organization where I don’t see my co-workers? … or where the organization only exists on a computer screen? Emerging changes in the legal and psychological contract further exacerbate this tenuous state of belongingness (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993; Rousseau, 1995). The power of collective bargaining has been diminished, and life-time employment is long gone. The implied contract of loyalty in exchange for job security is vulnerable. What, then, does it mean to belong to an organization that may not want me as a member at any time? Should I allow my self to be assimilated into the organization? Shouldn’t I act as a “free agent?” What should I do with my “gray flannel suit”? 

The belongingness challenge is compounded with changes yielding stronger needs to individuate, or separate oneself from an organization. The weakening of walls separating work from family -- evident in telecommuting, e-mail at home, daycare at work – remind us that we are more than just members of an employing organization. Similarly trends towards demographically diverse organizations remind us that we are a unique combination of various group memberships (e.g., ethnic, gender, generation). How, then, do we express these identities and differentiate ourselves from others at work? We suggest that these trends and tensions have and will continue to bring about changes in how the language of physical symbols is used by organizations and by individuals. These social actors can be expected to use more portable and instrumental symbols, and to express different and more complex types of meanings.

The push for the use of more portable symbols is brought about by a work force that is more dispersed and more mobile, hence requiring symbols that can easily be shuffled around. Non-portable physical symbols – such as architecture – become less important toward communicating identity, simply because fewer organizational members see them. We therefore expect a
replacement of some “office-bound” symbols with new ones that are less bound. Thus, business cards can be expected to replace diplomas, and wireless laptops and Internet connections are likely to replace traditional PC’s and LAN connections, to accommodate employees’ need to work out of a home, a car, or a client’s office rather than a home office. Portable symbols can become proxies for the organization even when an employee is not physically within organizational boundaries. More portable elements of dress such as scarves or aprons are also easier to maintain or carry around while performing multiple organizational roles than complete uniforms. These more portable types of symbols help create assimilation (by organizations) and identification (by individuals), yet allow flexibility for employees. In this vein, employees of Home Depot and similar service organizations are seen donning organizational aprons, smocks, or similar paraphernalia rather than complete uniforms. Aprons still serve identification and assimilation functions but are less difficult than complete uniforms to maintain and manage with a large and changing work force.

A similar shift can be expected towards more instrumental symbols. As individuals have less traditional “work space” in which to display symbols, symbols used are likely to be functional. Thus, we expect decreasing use of organizational wall hangings, awards and trophies, and organizational trinkets, and an increase in the use of multi-purpose symbols such as carrying cases or ties embossed with the corporate logo. This trend is evident in the actions of multiple companies, including Ford Motor Company, Delta airlines, and American Airlines who recently offered free computers and printers, as well as discounted Internet access, to their employees (www.examiner.com/000302/0302american.html). Such moves allow the organizations to put functional corporate symbols (via computers) into employees’ homes.

In addition to more portable and instrumental symbols, we expect individuals to use symbols to disidentify with their organization because of the shattering of legal and psychological contracts between individuals and their employing organizations. Disidentification is an active differentiation between the values of an individual and an organization (Elsbach, & Bhattacharya,
Evidence of disidentifying using physical symbols is abundant in the behavior of “gold collar workers” – young, intelligent, creative, and highly valuable workers with portable skills – who use physical symbols to differentiate themselves from the conservative cultures of the organizations that employ them. Munk (1998:64) describes these workers as those who eschew formal business wear, bring pets to work, and fill their offices with such things as Yamaha keyboard and a “20-gallon aquarium…filled with exotic electric-blue and tomato-orange fish.” Disidentification in this case seems to represent the desire to show that one is not the traditional “organization man” (or woman) as described by Whyte, (1956).

Other trends, namely the increasingly diverse work force and increasing pressures to maintain a healthy work-family balance can be predicted to lead to uses of symbols to convey more complex messages. Just as a sentence can convey more meaning than a single word, so too can patterns of symbols communicate more and complicated relationships. Since symbols are verbs, multiple symbols can reveal the multiple actions taken by individuals to enact their relationship to the organizations. To illustrate, symbols can communicate both wanting to belong to an organization, and trying to distinguish one’s self from the organization; this message is communicated by an employee wearing only part of a uniform, or by wearing an organizational pin on clothes that are not acceptable as work clothes. This employee is communicating both attraction to and differences with his or her organization. (cf. Ashforth & Mael, 1998; Brewer, 1991; Davis, 1992; Simmel, 1971).

Individuals may further engage symbols to identify with multiple identities(cf., Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Such actions are evident in adorning a work cubicle or office with family photos or with children’s drawings, or with “the world’s best mommy” or “the world’s best daddy” awards. The dual identity of organizational member and family person are evident in these cases. Physicians who wear a white lab coat over a three-piece suit may likewise signal their dual roles as
“healers” and as “business people.”

The expression of multiple identities may take on a dramatic emotional tone. If the pull towards and push from the organization is strong, individuals may use symbols to *ambivalently identify* (cf. Pratt, 2000; Pratt & Doucet, 2000). Enactment of this ambivalence is likely to vary both by individuals and by context, but can powerfully engage physical symbols. To illustrate, various forms of body piercing have recently become challenges to organizational attempts to completely control the appearance of employees. Karr (1999: A1) notes:

> Starbucks Corp.’s employee manual says earrings must be small, no more than two per ear. No nose rings, other pierced ornaments or visible tattoos are allowed, so as to present “a clean … appearance.”

Our recent visit to a local Starbucks cafe found an employee who may have been manifesting ambivalence with a pierced nose, but otherwise perfect compliance with organizational appearance standards. Hochschild powerfully (1989:29) describes how a coffee mug can convey the complex and ambivalent emotions that carrying multiple (work and family) identities can bring about:

> One mug portrays a working mother with the familiar briefcase in one hand and baby in the other. But there is striding, no smile, no backsweped hair. The woman’s mouth is a wiggly line. Her hair is unkempt. One shoe is red, one blue. In one hand she holds a wailing baby, in the other a brief case, papers cascading out. Beneath her it says, “I am a working mother. I am nuts.”

A person who buys or owns this mug conveys both feelings of obligation to work and the tensions of balancing work-family responsibilities.

*Organizations*, by contrast, are expected to react to the complex nature of evolving individual to organizational relationships by increasingly using symbols that prompt members to *embrace identity plurality*. That is, organizational use of symbols can be predicted to allow employees to simultaneously appear *both similar to and distinct from the organization*. This use of symbols seems critical for modern management since too much similarity can inhibit creativity and quality decision-making, yet too many differences can lead to conflict and anarchy (Cox & Blake, 1991;
“Casual Fridays” or “dressing down days” are one means of communicating such complex messages about identity. The four-day dress norm signals assimilation, while the fifth day allows for individuation. Yet even in “dressing down,” individuals are typically not given complete freedom of expression in their dress. At minimum, dressing down appearances are required to conform to some basic standards, such as “professionalism”; at worst, organizations actually prescribe guidelines for casual days (Bounds & Lublin, 1998; Goldberg, 1995; Mannix, 1997; Nabers, 1995; Pristin, 2000). Individuals can even be punished for casual dress code violations (Beck, 2000). In any case, relaxed dress codes seem to allow for the expression of more individual differences, while maintaining a certain amount of conformity to organizational values.

Similarly, organizations can maintain “cafeteria-style workplaces” that allow members to design their office space in a fashion that fulfills personal needs and expresses individual identities. Becker and Steele (1995: 137) describe such efforts as an “integrated workplace strategy.”

… an integrated workplace strategy does not promise all workers anything they want. But it does recognize that people are different, and so are their work styles and optimal work patterns. From this point of view, the goal is to create different work-place options that can be selected by people doing the same job but who have different work styles, people doing different jobs, or even the same people at different points in time as their personal circumstances change...

This arrangement allows for some individuating by members, but the organization still controls the components that organizational members can choose – thus signaling assimilating.

Taken together, there are several forms of identifying actions that can be taken by individuals and organizations using physical symbols. Such actions are important as physical symbols not only communicate relationships, but also serve as labels that influence how social meaning is constructed and enacted (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997). Thus, using symbolic initiating moves should evoke reactions from one’s audience and shape their interpretation of the relationship.
These identifying “moves” are summarized in Figure 2. This Figure is not meant to convey the full range of possible identity issues, but rather to provide a framework for thought about managing identity issues through physical symbols in modern organizations.

[INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Symbols and Status

Current theory and findings

Status is a fundamental characteristic of relationships between individuals and organizations (Giddens, 1984; Owens & Sutton, 1999; Pfeffer, 1981; Wegener, 1992), with a well-established link between physical symbols and status (cf., Becker & Steele, 1995; Fortenberry, Maclean, Morris, and O’Connell, 1978; Joseph & Alex, 1972; Ornstein, 1986; Sundstrom, 1986; Trice & Beyer, 1993). The link between objects and status is so embedded in the American culture that Fussel (1983: cover) introduces his book entitled “Class” as follows:

WHAT CLASS ARE YOU? Your living room announces it. Your favorite drink proclaims it. Your vocabulary shouts it. Your car tells the worlds.

In this vein Mark Twain is claimed to have quipped, “Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society.”

Previous work on physical symbols in organizations depicted how both individuals and organizations use symbols to reinforce the status structure of the organization (cf. Becker & Steele, 1995; Joseph & Alex, 1972; Ornstein, 1986; Sundstrom, 1986). Individuals’ uses of symbols have been noted to convey acceptance of the level of status bestowed upon them by their employer, or

complying with the status hierarchy. Chief executive officers are known to use dress to signal and reinforce their organizational status, as Glueck, (1989:27) describes:

Silver haired and dignified, wearing gold rimmed glasses and his C.E.O. uniform -dark suit, vest and rep tie- Angle [the C.E.O of Guardian Life Insurance Company] looks every inch the model of a major corporate mover.

Status may also be signaled using a variety of props, such as diplomas, awards, or wall hangings
Perhaps more surprising, low status individuals – especially those new to a group – can use symbols to help integrate themselves into the existing status hierarchy (Owens & Sutton, 1999). Drawing upon the work of Hughes (1951), Ashforth and Kreiner, (1999) report how individuals performing low status “dirty work” – work that is physically, socially, or morally tainted -- wear group or organizational clothing that signals their low status. Steinem’s (1983:35) description of wearing the demeaning costume of a Playboy Bunny also illustrates such acceptance:

A blue satin band with matching Bunny ears was fitted around my head like an enlarged bicycle clip, and a grapefruit-sized hemisphere of white fluff was attached to hooks at the costume's rear-most point. "Okay baby... Put on your high heels and go show Sheralee." I looked in the mirror. The Bunny looked back.

Organizations have traditionally used symbols to maintain the organizational status hierarchy (Fussell, 1983; Sundstrom, 1986). Van Maanen and Kunda (1989) describe how different costumes communicate status differences among Disney employees:

Uniforms provide instant communication about the social merits and demerits of the employee within the little world of Disney Land workers … Male ride operators on autopia (miniature car rides) wear, for example, untailored jump suits similar to pit mechanics and consequently generate as much respect from peers as the grease-stained outfits worn by pump jockeys generate from real motorists. The ill fitting and homogeneous whites worn by sweepers signifies lowly institutional work.... On the other hands, the crisp, officer like monorail operator [carries] valued symbols in and outside the park. Employees lust for these high status positions and the rights to small advantages such uniforms provide.

The physical design of a work place can also serve as a symbol that enhances the status of an office bearer (cf. Oldham & Rotchford 1983). Office location, accessibility (private vs. open office), floor space, furnishings, and the ability to personalize one’s office space all serve as what Sundstrom (1986) labeled “status markers.” The use of physical symbols as status markers is vividly evident in the Manhattan offices of Union Carbide’s, as described by Becker & Steele, (1995: 27):

Every aspect of the office environment was part of a widely understood and sophisticated status language. More space, wooden furniture, better views – all
were associated with higher rank. How close you were located to senior management was also a matter of rank, and so was the floor you worked on. … The material your coffee-pot or ashtray was made of also connoted status; so did having or not having carpet or wallpaper, and if you did, what color and grade it was.

Changes in symbol use due to the changing context of modern organizations

Changes in the context of modern organizations suggest a need for more complex status messages than status acceptance or compliance for individuals and status differentiation for organizations. Symbols may still be used to denote status differences, but a wider range of status issues are likely to be communicated and managed using the language of physical symbols. This expansion in managing status issues is due to the evolving tension in organizations between the need to empower and the need to exert control. There is a trend towards empowerment because of the need for employees to act swiftly, without relying on specific instructions from their manager (Bowen and Lawler, 1992; Conger and Kanungo, 1988). Symbols are needed to remind members of the individual potency and autonomy implied by this trend. Yet organizations still need to remind employees “who is in control” and physical symbols help communicate these messages. The result of this new complexity is likely to be manifest in the types of symbols individuals and organizations employ, and the status-related issues they convey through the symbols.

Specifically, symbols can be expected to shift towards the more portable and more instrumental (See Figure 1). To illustrate, when the Academy of Management Journal recently decided to reward its top reviewers, they used very portable and very instrumental symbols, such as umbrellas and suitcases that carry the organizational (AMJ) logo. Recent research also suggests that new coin of the “status” realm may be technology (Owens & Sutton, 1999). To illustrate, note the following description of David Liederman, CEO of David’s Cookies which weaves references to technology (e.g., cameras, car, office machines) with traditional “status symbols”:

Ring the bell, and when you have passed the inspection over the hidden TV camera, walk through the garage and past the family Mercedes 300 TD station wagon to a
two room office area. One room, which is long and narrow, is filled with three or four people working at electronic office machines. The other, larger room, is filled with 35 year old David Leaderman. (Richman, 1984: 39).

In addition, given the social trends of individuation, we expect individuals to increasingly use symbols to defy the status hierarchy rather than to comply. Such use of symbols will signal to an organization that prevailing status distinctions are unacceptable, either because ascribed individual status is too low, or because status differences create social discomfort. Such “status work” can thus take two forms: enhancing status and reducing status. The aim of both of these attempts is to create the impression of status equity between an individual and some target group. Enhancing status is an attempt to project a higher status than that formally conferred by the organization, making one’s self look more important than one might actually be (Jackall, 1988). For example, Rafaeli, Dutton, Harquail & Mackie-Lewis (1997:30) describe an administrative employee who used attire to communicate her fit to senior management:

I’m in a middle management position; [therefore I must dress up because] when I’m sitting in a meeting with people that are all at higher levels than I, only if I’m dressed right, then I don’t feel so intimidated or out of place.

This type of status defiance work may be the premise underlying Molloy’s (1975; 1977) “Dress for Success.” Such status defiance attempts are socially legitimated by non-profit organizations such as Dress for Success, and the "Wardrobe Library” run by Hebrew Union College in New York (. Both organizations provide low-income individuals with formal suits and dresses to be used on job interviews. The Dress for Success’ mission statement states it is a ““Catch-22" that, without a job, how can you afford a suit? But without a suit, how can you get that job?” Thus, individual use of a symbol that defies low status is essential to obtaining a job that will enable one to afford clothes that communicate higher status (www.dressforsuccess.org).

Although making one appear to be of higher status is not all that new, trends towards empowerment have made an opposite type of status defiance – status reduction – more prevalent as
well. The motivation may be to signal that one is not “caught up” in status games but rather is “just one of the gang.” This was manifest in the behavior of the former CEO of Tyson chicken, Donald Tyson who was described by Stewart (1997: 58) as showing up to work “in the same brown uniform his workers wore, with “Don” embroidered above the shirt pocket.” Lowering one’s apparent status may also reflect a need to communicate flexibility – a trait necessary in modern organizations. As Pristin (2000) describes:

> Many professionals say that dispensing with suits has made them more comfortable and hence more productive. In a March 13 memo announcing the new dress policy, William B. Harrison Jr., the chairman of Chase, the city's largest private employer, said, "A more casual work environment mirrors the more flexible, informal organization that we need to become."

Patterns of symbols can also convey or enact complex notions of status, notably mixed messages regarding felt or desired status in the organization as compared to the status conferred by the organization. For example, assistant professors who put up expensive prints and posters in their office, but also use old industrial metal desks are ambivalently complying with the organizational status hierarchy.

The status ambivalence felt by working women is manifest in their symbol predicament (Hollander, 1994; Wolf, 1991). Wolf (1991) suggests that high status women in organizations (and in society, more generally) are often pressured to forego symbols of feminine status – such as jewelry and makeup – in order to ‘fit in’ with business (i.e., male) status. To partially rebel against these restrictions, women’s business suits attempt to incorporate both business (‘male’) status elements – the suit -- with ‘feminine (beauty status symbols such as ornamentation and color scheme (Hollander, 1994). Women who wear such patterns of symbols express status ambivalence.

At the organizational level we expect an increasing use of physical symbols that level status or that encourage perceptions of equal status (Trice & Beyer, 1993: 121). Status leveling helps reinforce empowerment messages by communicating that power is shared throughout the
organization. Office architecture can be used by organizations as a status-equalizing symbol. Office cubicles – that designate low status -- are used by some organizations as a symbol of equality. In both the Intel Corporation and the Steelcase Corporation, CEO’s (Andy Grove and Jim Hackett, respectively) occupy a cubicle, similar to staff employees (Stewart, 1997:60). This use provides a different interpretation to more popular beliefs about what cubicles convey -- such as those immortalized in Dilbert cartoons and featured in Figure 3.

[INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

More generally, Becker and Steele (1995: 35) provide numerous examples of organizations using physical layout to “remove the status straitjacket.” Prime examples include the use of the “universal plan” of same size offices, or the use of a lottery (slips of paper in a hat) to allocate offices.

Organizations, however, can be caught between wanting to empower employees, while at the same time retaining certain status distinctions (cf. Donnellon, 1996; Pfeffer, 1981; Smith & Berg, 1988). This may yield organizational actions that *ambivalently maintain the status hierarchy*, or messages to employees to both conform to and eschew hierarchical distinctions. Martin, Knopoff and Beckman (1998:443), for example, describe how an artifact -- a red envelope -- represents the struggle of the management of The Body Shop regarding how much power to give employees in a grievance procedure:

A formal rule gave any employee the right to send a “red envelope” of complaint with the understanding that it would be read and acted upon within 24 hours by a member of the board of directors. Although we were initially skeptical about the extent to which top management would truly encourage dissent, we observed challenging interactions frequently, in relation to Ms. Roddick, other top managers, and among work peers. We were privy to some gossip, backbiting, sarcasm, jokes and complaints. We also saw instances in which conflict, frankness, and challenges to authority were squelched, silenced, or disregarded.

In a similar vein, the office designs at Hewlett-Packard (HP) are based on open office designs that communicate equality (Lieber, 1996: 206). Yet indications of status do exist at HP. CEO Lew
Platt, for example, is described by Siegel, (1998: 258) as working “in a very large cubicle.”

Taken together, individuals and organizations can communicate multiple status-related relationship issues. Figure 4 shows the status messages that physical symbols can convey. This Figure is, again, not meant to convey the full range of possible symbol actions regarding status, but rather to provide a framework for the understanding of status issues inherent in physical symbol actions in modern organizations. It also indicates the action labels that social actors use to reshape and redefine their relationships with their individual or organizational audiences.

[INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

SYMBOL TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

We have argued that individuals and organizations interact using symbol ‘verbs’ to communicate and enact new and increasingly complex relationship issues. As organizations and their members use symbols in new and more complex ways, the chances for problems of miscommunication increase. The problems of miscommunication are exacerbated by the fact that the meanings of physical symbols -- or any symbol -- are socially constructed. Symbols, like words, can mean different things in different contexts since members in different communities can infuse similar artifacts with different meanings. We identify three key types of such miscommunication.

Accidental signaling

Accidental signaling is a case of miscommunication about the type of relationship being signaled. This may occur when an audience interprets relationship information not intended by the actor. Individuals, for example, can inadvertently signal a higher position in the organization than what they formally or currently have -- or unintentionally engage in status defiance -- without intending to do so. Lewis (1989: 37), for example, describes what happened when he entered an organizational “community” and found a seemingly innocuous piece of clothing was a powerful
In a meeting with management as a new trainee for Solomon Brothers, I had taken the opportunity to break out a pair of red suspenders with large gold dollar signs running down them...[a manager said to me] “don't let them see you on the training floor with these things. Managing directors are the only guys who can get away with wearing suspenders.”

Similarly organizational identity symbols may be interpreted as communicating very different messages than what the organization had intended. In the United States, for example, several colleges were baffled when members viewed their use of American Indians as mascots as a racist action. Such “translation” problems are likely exacerbated in cross-cultural situations (Hall, 1987; Hall & Hall, 1990).

Strategically ambiguous signaling by an actor

Strategically ambiguous signaling by an actor involves capitalizing on the fact that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between a symbol and a particular meaning (Blumer, 1969; McCarthy, 1984; Mead, 1934). Actors can take advantage of this inherent ambiguity in symbols. Pratt and Foreman (2000) use the work of Alexander (1996) to illustrate how managers can use ambiguous symbols to communicate different identities to different constituents. Specifically, they suggest that art museum directors show exhibits that will appeal to several different audiences on different levels in order to be ‘all things to all people.’ In this case, a museum exhibit communicates to some groups that the museum is a prestigious social institution, while to others the same exhibit signals that the museum is a gathering place for the public consumption of art. Such ‘strategic ambiguity,’ however, requires great caution as it may backfire due to confusion or mistrust on the part of the audience.

Signaling interrelated relationships

Interrelated relationships that are caused by an overlap between or among relationship types is a third source of confusion. Relationships can vary in terms of how independent or interdependent they are. Our analysis has depicted identity as independent of status, but this is not necessarily a valid assumption. To illustrate, Pratt & Rafaeli, (1997) as well as Wegener, (1992)
suggest that identity and status in an organization may co-vary. Similarly, Wolf (1991) and Hollander (1994) suggest that a woman’s gender identity is woven with her status in the organization.

Such overlap among relationship types may muddle interpretation of symbols. To illustrate, individuals may don organizational attire because they actually share organizational values and beliefs. They might also don the same attire because the organization will punish them if they do not wear it. Thus employees may wear attire either because they have to or because they want to. Such distinctions may be masked if both relationship orientations are expressed in the same symbol.

One way to distinguish between “having to” and “wanting to” motivations may be a focused look at the policies regarding the symbol, and at how the symbol is used when there are few policies or incentives regarding its use. Rafaeli (1989b), for example, found that cashiers wanted to wear a smock even though there was no formal policy in this regard, suggesting that they saw the smock as a sign of status toward customers rather than a form of compliance. However this insight required examining the policies of the organization in addition to observing symbolic behavior. Additional rich insights regarding the meaning of a symbol may be obtained by looking at how symbolic relating work is practiced by individuals away from their work places, such as at home or at play. Informal reports abound about new military recruits wearing their uniforms off duty because they take pride in their newly formed identity as members of the military.

**Overcoming Translation Problems**

When symbols are confused, members may enter into negotiation regarding their use – just as they would when confronted with miscommunications in verbal language. The process could be an act questioning “what do you mean by…?” presented by an audience, or it could be an act of “what I meant is…?” presented by an actor. Such negotiation may bring actors and audiences from
a point of misunderstanding, to one of understanding. Untangling the complete and complex nature of all such negotiation is beyond the scope of this essay. But as a point of departure, relying on findings on the use of verbal language allows us to suggest some actions an actor might take to more clearly communicate relationship information to audience: Symbol intensification, symbol redundancy, symbol reduction, and symbol transformation.

Symbol intensification

Symbol intensification involves adopting more extreme form of symbol. In language terms, it is akin to raising one’s voice, adding an interjection to strengthen one’s point, or adding an “exclamation point” to the end of a sentence. To illustrate, an organization that fails to accomplish assimilating work by having members wear aprons, may add jackets or ties, or turn to a more extreme form of dress code covering members’ complete dress. Similarly, an individual frustrated with the level of status that his or her cell phone elicits may buy a more expensive phone to enhance his or her status.

Symbol redundancy

Symbol redundancy involves using more than one symbol to communicate the same type of relationship. Returning to Table 1, multiple symbols can communicate similar messages, and the use of multiple symbols may serve to clarify or distill the message to the audience. This strategy is similar to repeating one’s self in order to reinforce a message. For example, prescribing both what members can wear and what kind of furniture they can have in their office may facilitate status work more than each symbol by itself. Similarly, an individual displaying the corporate logo on his or her clothes, and putting a company bumper sticker on his or her car (and possibly also tattooing the logo on his or her body!) may be redundant, but may more clearly communicate one’s identification.

Symbol redundancy may even involve using the same symbol at different points of time. For
example, if you are not pleased with the status that one cell phone offers, you can buy a second or a third phone. Stern (1988:288) suggests the redundancy involved in sending recognition letters every five years may have a cumulative effect:

[Recognition] letters continue to be sent to employees every five years. One secretary neatly bound the anniversary letters she received during her thirty years of service and exhibited a great deal of pride in having been deemed worthy of so much service.

**Symbol reduction**

*Symbol reduction* may help eliminate mixed messages regarding identity and status (i.e., various forms of ambivalence work). The analogy to language here is changing a compound or complex sentence into a simple one – or moving from many “verbs” to one verb. To illustrate, making the size of the CEO’s cubicle at HP similar to that of other employees would send a clearer message of equality to organizational employees, and would be more consistent with other organizational symbols. Similarly, *not* wearing one’s old IBM T-shirt to one’s new job at Apple would increase the effectiveness of one’s other identification symbols (e.g., wearing an Apple cap).

**Symbol transformation**

*Symbol transformation* involves changing the nature of existing symbols to clarify relationship messages. In verbal language, this occurs when an individual or group takes a word that has a negative connotation, and changes it to a more positive one. To illustrate, Bill Gates has helped redefine the meaning of “geek” by pointing to his own success as a geek. A similar transformation can occur with physical symbols. For example, organizations wanting to communicate a “bottom-up” organization may want to post an inverted “top-down” organizational chart as a means of signaling the relationship. Similarly, it is rumored that the first “engineers ring” (an iron or steel ring worn on the pinky of the writing hand) came from the remains of the Bridge of Quebec that
collapsed in 1907 due to a faulty engineering design (http://cagesun.nmsu.edu/~ordeng/info.html). In fashioning these rings engineers transformed the bridge’s metal from a reminder of failure, into a symbol of professional pride.

Using cubicles to denote equality is another example of symbolic transformation. As noted in many Dilbert cartoons, cubicles are often the quintessential symbol or corporate hierarchy. However, by moving their executives (e.g., Andy Groves and Jim Hackett) into cubicles, organizations have attempted to transform the meaning of this symbol (Stewart, 1997).

**TOWARDS FUTURE RESEARCH**

The relationships between individuals and organizations is changing as organizations become more diverse, as employees become more physically dispersed, and as the psychological contract linking the two is renegotiated. We have argued that one way to better understand these changes – especially as they relate to identity and status -- is to look at the language of physical symbols. Viewing physical symbols as a language provides insight by reminding us that these symbols serve as ‘verbs’ reflecting and constructing meaning between social actors. It also points out that such meaning can be found in individual symbols (words) and in patterns of symbols (sentences). Symbolic patterns are especially useful in realizing complex and sometimes subtle relationship issues, such as those involving ambivalence or plurality (cf. Pratt & Barnett, 1997; Pratt & Dutton, 2000).

Our advice to ‘listen’ to how physical symbols ‘talk’ about changes in modern individual-organizational relationships allows us to ‘hear’ important discussions of fundamental issues of identity and status. Our analysis suggests that fixed and relatively non-instrumental symbols are giving way to portable and instrumental ones. These new words are communicating new messages. With regard to identity issues, physical symbols suggest that individuals are distancing themselves from their organizations either completely (e.g., disidentifying) or partially (e.g., identifying with multiple identities). Organizations, in turn, legitimate some of this distancing by
using physical symbols to preach identity plurality. With regard to status issues, organizations either completely or partially (leveling or ambivalently maintaining) remove messages about status hierarchy as empowerment enters their symbolic rhetoric. Individuals have embraced this rhetoric by using symbols to defy status distinctions, or by ambivalently clinging to the old hierarchical arrangement.

Viewing physical symbols as language makes two fundamental contributions to scholarship on symbols. First, it suggests the importance of physical symbols by elaborating the process by which they work in organizations. In doing so, we elevate them from superficial tips of Schein’s (1983) cultural iceberg, to instrumental building blocks that essentially construct identity and status aspects of relationships. That symbols are integral to organizational functioning is not new (cf. Morgan, Frost, and Pondy, 1983). However, previous work on symbolism views symbols as simply reflecting the cultural values of the organization (see Trice & Beyer, 1993 for review), and does not elucidate the social-psychological processes that make them integral to the everyday functioning of organizations. We view the process of symbols as one of language labeling. Symbols communicate how social actors are similar or different, in-group or out-group, friend or foe. These relationship labels, in turn, influence how social actors categorize and thus relate to others in their environment. Future research can more closely examine how symbols (physical objects and others) are used in everyday interactions to reflect, enforce, or transform how social actors interact with each other.

Second, viewing symbols as a language emphasizes the relational aspects of symbols. Just as talking involves both sender and receiver, so too are symbols viewed best in the context of a relationship between actor and audience. Examining symbols in relationships allows us to see a reflection and enactment of employee-employer relationship issues. As such, our analysis contributes to a growing body of research that examines positive, negative, and ambivalent relationships between individuals and organizations (Dukerich, et al., 1988; Elsbach, 1999; Pratt, 2000; Pratt & Doucet, 2000). However, our analysis can also be applied to other relationship contexts (Rafaeli, 1996). To illustrate, interpersonal relationships (see Berscheid, 1994 and Clark
& Reis, 1988 for reviews), interorganizational relationships, and other “meso” relationships
to organizations and external constituents such as customers, vendors, or temporary
employees are amounting to be more and more significant for organizations. Our analysis is useful
for understanding and analyzing these relationships as well.

Future research can also extend our analyses to other aspects of relationships. We focused on
the fundamental notions of identity and status for reasons of brevity, but other aspects of
relationships are worthy of future research. To illustrate, organizations wishing to communicate to
outsiders that they are like other health-related organizations may use the symbol of a red cross
or may require members to wear medical attire as a means of legitimating themselves to their
constituents (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). Legitimacy seems
to involve both identity and status aspects of relating.

To close, we suggest that future work on physical symbols should look to the past. The
original symbol was a broken tile given by a host to his or her guests to signify that they and their
descendants would be welcomed back into the house. The message embedded in this historical
anecdote -- that physical symbols can convey a sense of community between an actor (e.g., host)
and an audience (e.g., guest) – positions symbols as a language spoken by one and all everyday of
our life. As such, research on symbols should not be consigned to detached studies of cultures, but
rather should be integrated into the study of how social actors in organizations routinely influence
and relate to one another.
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We realize the reification problem here. Yet, although organizations clearly do not “act,” organizational members are an audience that reacts to symbols, so the presentation of a physical symbol in an organization can be described as an organizational action that influences members.

This is not to say that someone can use a diploma for non-symbolic reasons – such as using it for scrap paper. We are not arguing that individuals are “functionally fixed” and cannot think of creative ways to use symbols. We do argue that some symbols more easily and clearly relate to non-symbolic use than others.

This word is actually an interesting example because its etymology dates to the term banc, which means ‘bench.’ Thus, the name of a physical object has come to represent the place of business of a money-changer.

“Involvement / detachment” is sometimes viewed as a third dimension of relationships (Hinde, 1997). However, we believe this dimension is addressed in the identity construct, since adopted identities denote one’s sense of involvement with a social other.

As noted earlier, notwithstanding reification concerns, the influence of physical symbols in an organization on organizational members suggests that symbols can be viewed as a verb that refers to the influence of organizations on their members’ sense of relationship to the organization.

It has been argued that organizations may have more than one identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Individuals may therefore signal similarities or dissimilarities with one or more of an organization’s multiple identities. Similarly, organizations may ask individuals to reflect (or not) these multiple identities. Such complexity, however, is beyond the realm of this paper. For the sake of brevity we refer to individuals as signaling similarity (or not) within of an organization’s identities, and to organizations signaling to individuals to reflect (or not) one of the organizational identities.

Value congruence has been noted as central to the establishment of a relationship between an individual and a collective in a diverse set of studies (see for example Judge & Ferris, 1992; Kristoff, 1996; Meyer & Allen, 1991, 1997; Mowday, et al., 1982; O’Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991; Pratt, 1998).

James (1890: 177) clearly argues for the importance of dress in establishing one’s identity when noting that “[t]he body is the innermost part of the material me in each of us; and certain parts of the body seem more intimately ours than the rest. The clothes come next. The old saying that human person is composed of three parts – soul, body and clothes – is more than a joke.”

Clearly identification efforts may be sincere or not sincere. Theorists have distinguished between “verbal” converts who verbally advocate particular values and “total” converts who back their verbal statements with actions (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Similarly non-verbal symbols may be engaged to communicate “identification” without an actual espousing of organizational values.

This predicament leaves room for creative marketing: Hudson Department Stores published a complete hard-cover book entitled The Complete Guide to Dressing for Workplace Casual (Hudson, 1995).

The motivations of actors need not be mutually exclusive. Employees may use symbols to both show identification with and comply with organizational demands. Similarly, collectives may use one symbol to communicate a variety of relationships. To illustrate, organizations may require members to wear uniforms both because of their role in imbuing identity and because of the status and legitimacy information to both insiders and outsiders (Clegg & Thompson, 1979; Joseph & Alex, 1972; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; Sundstrom, 1986). Thus, police uniforms imbue members with identity, establish status distinctions, and allow police men and women the trust of civilians. Uniforms, therefore, can signal a number of relationships. As with other symbols, the relationships communicated may not be sincere. Police uniforms are such powerful symbols that donning one allows people who are not cops to perform illicit acts (Baker, 1985).

The use of a red cross for medical organizations is part of a broader phenomena wherein medical organizations adopt religious symbols. In Israel, for example, the equivalent function is performed by an organization called ‘Magen David Adom’, which literally means “The Red Star of David”, maintaining the Jewish religious symbol. Such use of physical symbols is powerful, yet not yet fully understood.