

# **Group Construction**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Angela C. Covey

Thesis Advisor

Lynda Malugen

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lynda Malugen". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the printed name of the thesis advisor.

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1999

Expected Date of Graduation

May 1999

SpColl  
Thesis  
LD  
2489  
.24  
1999  
-C68

**Author's Note**

The purpose of this honors thesis is to bring together two major parts of my life. Through out my college career I was very involved in student organizations and I was always looking for ways to improve the organizations I was in. I attended many leadership conferences and participated in many outstanding groups. I began to wonder what it was that made these groups work so well together and how could I replicate that group cohesiveness into my own organization and help others do the same? Those questions lead to the study of community, which is a subject that was addressed briefly at a leadership conference I had attended. After finding nothing there, I asked my honors colloquium professor, Dr. Marcy Meyer, if there was a topic in the study of Speech Communication that embodied the ideas and concepts of community. She pointed me in the direction of Organizational Culture. After a long discovery period of what this subject actually is, I find myself at the end, presenting the completed work of my honors thesis; the combination of student organizations and the scholarly field of Organizational culture.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank several individuals who helped me complete this thesis. With out all of you I would not have accomplished as much as I have. Thank you for the time you invested in my dreams and crazy ideas. Your constant encouragement and willingness to share your knowledge, experiences, and talents with me helped to make this thesis the best that it could ever be. Foremost, I would like to thank my parents for always asking questions and listening to my ideas as they constantly changed. Mom, thank you for the brainstorm that helped produce the final product. Dad, thank you for your leadership and teaching me along the way. To my friends thank you for the long drives and talks about construction that brought about the ideas of group construction. To Paul Ashley, we make a great team and the Magnet Effect is finally published. Lynda Malugen, thank you for your guidance through out my last two years at college and for helping me fine-tune my leadership skills by constantly placing before me new leadership challenges. Thank you to Dr. Shue for taking time out to help a student from the chemistry department. You helped me turn a hobby into learning experience. The time and energy you devoted to teaching me about social construction was immeasurable. Thanks to everyone, you were all my guiding lights.

## **Group Construction**

**Build it up, tear it down, positive or negative, it is your choice**

Envision that you are working on a project or event for your organization whether that is a business, student organization, or a class project. When the group was first chosen the members of this newly formed group knew very little of one another, at most you might have known their name or what they looked like. Your first meeting is introductory, getting to know one another better and working on setting the goal for this project. As time progresses the project is nearing completion and you look at those people in your group who were once strangers, and think, "If I could work with this group on every project for the rest of my life we would be so successful". You knew then just as we all know now, that it is impossible to maintain the same group throughout your whole life. What if I told you that it **was** possible to create that same feeling of success and partnership with a new group of individuals?

I was fortunate enough to encounter this type of supportive and successful group atmosphere several times through out my college career and I began to wonder why certain groups that I was a part of shared this success and camaraderie and then there were other groups that I would rather not gather together again. This question led me to the study of organizational culture and then to the idea of social construction. After studying the various concepts of social construction and adding a few of my own ideas, I have developed three main concepts which help form a positive culture with in any group or organization that you may be involved with.

## What is Social Construction?

*The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell and a hell of heaven.*

*Milton—Paradise Lost*

The general theories and concepts of “social construction” refer to a broad idea that applies to our entire life. However, a lot of the literature that I read pertained to how social construction operated in business organizations. Specifically how the ideas of social construction could be used to improve business organizations. I was able to relate to what these sources were saying because the exact situations that they were describing or ones similar to them had occurred in a student organization that I was involved with. Furthermore, if these theories and concepts were improving business organizations why not help student organizations by utilizing the same ideas? In applying the concepts of social construction I was able to address what it was that made some groups work well together and others not.

You may be asking your selves why I feel it is so important to focus on building this positive culture in student organizations and groups. The answer lies in the facts. According to the office of Academic Assessment here at Ball State University, by the time students reach their senior year approximately 50% have been involved in a student group at some time during their college career. That number does not include all of the group projects that we, as students, have participated in for class, which are also applicable settings for the concept and theories of social construction. Given this level of participation, it makes sense that we try to make the most out of our experiences.

So, what is social construction? Social construction is the idea of a human built reality. We (humans) are in charge of our own environment, culture, and future, we have

the ability to construct our own reality as well as to destruct our reality. What this means in relation to our own student organizations is that we are in control, we build that organization and give it power. Social construction is an enormous responsibility for each of us to have, but we exercise this right daily. For example, if everyone could find a partner among the group with a name tag that is opposite the color of your own. Those with "green" nametags; your job is to create a pleasant environment with your partner. Those with "blue" nametags; your job is to create a cold and harsh environment with your partner. Now what actions did each side actively take to create that environment? This simple exercise demonstrates how easily the culture around you can be altered.

Picture this example, you are a part of an organization of 20 people, and there is a project deadline quickly approaching. Everyone is out of focus of the goal and extremely stressed. What might you suggest in this situation? {Ask the audience} {Why did you answer in the way that you did?} I personally would suggest ordering pizza and taking an hour break. I have just actively affected my culture and more than likely my culture was effected positively because it involved food. Effecting your culture with food brings up a good point. How many events that we attend involve food? There are company picnics, "finals foods", and potluck dinners just to name a few. Each of us might have handled this situation differently, but those various ideas and actions are what create culture and if used at the right time can create a positive culture.

Another concept that is important to social construction is the idea of symbols. Griffin (1994) defines symbols, as stimuli that have learned meaning and value for people; the individuals own thought process modifies the interpretation of each of these symbols. Back to our first two examples, what do you think were the symbols in those situations? {Discussion} Actually, all of the actions used to create the two different

environments are symbols. The identification and interpretation of symbols is a very messy because people interpret things very differently. Which leads into another idea relating to symbols.

There are various interpretations of symbols and being perceptive of various symbols occurring in the culture of your organization and gaining a general idea of how members interpret those symbols can effect the creation of a positive culture. Two examples that demonstrate this point are speed limit signs and jokes. How many of you when you see this sign do exactly what it tells you? Most of use see this sign and will go 5 miles over and others of us may see this sign as reading 10 over. My second example is when someone tells a joke there are some people who may take offence to the reference of the joke and still others will pass it on. It is impossible to know how every member of the group perceives a particular symbol, but it is important to ask enough questions, in order to carefully construct our culture, because symbols are open to interpretation.

Now that we understand the basic concept of social construction, symbols, and how symbols are interpreted, we can pinpoint characteristics of the positive culture each of us envisioned when I first began, in order to recreate a similar positive culture in the future. When looking back at the times in which I was a part of an organization with a supportive atmosphere and also in speaking with others who have shared similar experiences there are significant characteristics that were common to each situation, those being rituals, language and cooperation.

When most of think of ritual, ceremonies preformed at church or in your organizations may come to mind. You will find as I further explain the definition of rituals that those rituals that immediately come to mind do fit perfectly to the definition of ritual, however, I challenge you to view rituals as unwritten activities that occur

frequently and serve each of the major functions within organizations. The four major functions that rituals serve are to socialize, stabilize, reduce anxieties and ambiguities, and to convey messages to those outside the organization. I am going to give an example of a ritual that embodies each of these four functions and created a positive culture in a group that I was a part of. This ritual may be familiar to several of you; it is an established meeting time for the group, which in my case was more frequent than just once a week. This meeting time allowed the members of our group time to socialize and to get to know one another. It was stabilizing because every member knew that if they encountered a problem with their portion of the project they could get help at the next meeting, which would be only a few days away. This ritual also reduced anxiety; because knowing that there was an upcoming meeting the members also knew that everyone would be there to help with any problems because this time has been agreed upon by all the members of the group. Our ritual of a standard and frequent meeting time conveyed the message to outside organizations that our group had "it" together and even though this meeting time was sometimes used for socializing, it still sent the message to others outside the group that the work was done and we were enjoying the company of one another even though we had worked together for so long on the same project.

Another personal example that most of us can relate to occurs at the beginning of the year recruitment. After a process such as Panhellenic recruitment, which is what I am most familiar with I feel closer to the members of my organization than I did before the process began. Why is that? The answer lies in the countless hours that we end up spending together and the rituals that we all create. That time spent together at the same time every night serves the four major functions of ritual and our group was more cohesive and productive because of these established positive rituals.

As you can see from the various examples, rituals are an important part in creating a positive culture. Some times rituals are deliberately created and other times they are not, which if may have a negative or positive effect on the culture of your organization unless the rituals are realized, and maintained or eliminated. If you think that your group is lacking ritual and that might be preventing the evolution of a positive culture take a look around, there are probably positive rituals established already that you may be over looking and you can push them to the forefront, by recognizing their worth. The key is to recognize ritual, eliminate negative rituals, and utilize positive rituals more. By doing this evaluation with the rituals of your organization you will be creating positive change in the culture of your organization.

Creating a positive culture is the job of every member of the group. Rituals may be deliberately established or occur spontaneously and to recognize the importance of positive rituals is what builds a positive culture. Language is another contributor to the creation of a positive culture, above all, it is something that every member of the group can work on and help one another with. There are two types of language that I will discuss and explain how they affect the formation of a positive culture. The two types of language are positive and negative language and I will help you grasp the concept of both by asking you to think of the most negative person you know and then think of the most positive person you know. I will not ask you to reveal the identity of those individuals but if you could tell me some of the things that they might say. First, we will begin with the most negative person you know. {Discussion} Some other examples of negative language this individual may use are phrases such as, “that’s a horrible idea”, “that will never work”, “this organization is going down the drain”, or “let’s get this over with”. When thinking of forming a positive culture it is obvious that this negative language does

not fit, but the question to answer is, “How does negative language hinder the formation of a positive culture?”. The answer is in understanding the power of language. The way we think is influenced by the way we talk. If any member of the organization is using negative language similar to the phrases we mentioned a few minutes ago, they are influencing the way the members, themselves included, think. What do you think happens when members repetitively hear negative language in reference to the organization or group they are a part of? {Discussion?} Overall, the group morale is diminished, and the goal that the group has been working toward may not seem worth achieving if all members of the group are not willing to focus on the strides and efforts put forth already in pursuit of the group goal. The effect that the individuals using negative language have on the rest of the group is what I like to call the Magnet Effect.

This term was thought up by a friend of mine, Paul Ashely, and me. The Magnet Effect is the combination of a physics concept and the way negative language and positive language effects members of organizations. If you look at this picture of a magnet, you will see both a positive and negative end, representing in our case the user of positive language and those who use negative language, respectively. Looking at the arrows of the negative forces you can see that the arrows are pointing in toward the negative end of the magnet. This illustrates that just one person in your organization is utilizing negative language then other members will be drawn to the magnet of negative language.

What language came to mind when I asked you to think of the most positive person that you know? {Discussion} Let’s return to our example of the Magnet Effect, and see how it also illustrates positive language forces distributed from the positive end of the magnet are outward flowing, demonstrating how the use of positive language effects an organization. Examples of positive language would be positive reinforcement,

caring about the progress of events in another member's life, and taking negative language and re-phrasing it so that it is constructive. When brainstorming examples of positive language I thought it was more difficult than thinking of negative language. I feel that not being able to think of positive language as easily as negative language is a statement in it self. It suggests that negative language has a greater effect on us possibly because we hear it more often.

Language is as powerful as the largest magnet in the world and when used constructively can create a positive culture. One important way that we use positive language and symbols is with metaphors. Metaphors "allow cues from one context to be applied to the understanding of another". An example of this would be to take the cues from one context the family, which brings to our minds pictures of your own family or the average American family of 4.5 people and their dog all sitting together enjoying each others presence. Then apply these cues of the family to the understanding of another group, which could be an organization. These two words each have their own understandings, but when placed together they combine to form a new meaning. The combined meaning suggests that organizations should work as families and that all of the responsibilities that the members of a family have for one another should be the same among co-workers. This metaphorical example of families and organizations is a very real example for student organizations on our campus, namely the Greek community. For instance, Greeks refer to members of their chapters as big and little brothers/sisters which implies the family relations and responsibilities. The naming of all Greek members as a community, as I alluded to earlier, is also a metaphor. This metaphor brings the ideas of a close knit community together with the members of Greek

organizations implying that Greek members should respect one another as you would your neighbors at home in your own communities.

Language and ritual are both very powerful tools that you can utilize to construct a positive culture within your own organization or group. Both offering their own outlook on culture, which when brought together and utilized positively help form a highly developed and cohesive group, which is what if you really think about it occurred in the most supportive and fulfilling group that you envisioned when I first began.

“If we sink or swim together, then it serves the interests of all parties to assist one another in treading water” (Rothwell). A large contributor to group development is cooperation, which over time leads to a highly developed group with a strong sense of cohesion. “For cooperation to become wide spread, it has to be structured into the framework of the group for the benefit of all members”. Structured cooperation can be created through rituals and positive language. Those two positive practices not only enhance cooperation, but together the members are actively creating a positive culture. Positive language used by all members of the group enhances self-esteem and encourages openness and honesty, according to Rothwell. In return for openness, honesty and enhanced self-esteem the group culture benefits through the cooperation of the members. We can also see how ritual can enhance cooperation within an organization because those who choose to participate in the group rituals are socializing which often leads to a more stable environment and a heightened sense of cooperation.

Cooperation is a word that we have heard used probably since kindergarten when our parents were trying to teach us not to be bossy when you and all of your friends were playing a game. We have a learned definition of what cooperation means, but what cooperation looks like in a group or organization is probably not as clear. Envision again

that you are among the people of the most supportive group you have encountered in your lifetime thus far. Were there group goals? Was there a division of labor, distribution of rewards and individual accountability of group members? If you can answer yes to all of these questions then what your group looked and felt like throughout the duration of your time together was the cooperation of a highly developed group.

Positive rituals and positive language are socially constructed and simultaneously link to help create a strong sense of cooperation among group members. The highest pinnacle of group formation can be reached, cohesion. Cohesion is not an event or a goal that can be set by the members of the group. Cohesion is not reached with all groups and that is why we remember the occurrence of cohesion so vividly. Cohesiveness is the degree of liking, members have for each other and the commitment to the group.

Cohesiveness is what allows group achievement of goals, because it embodies compatible membership, tasks are accomplished, there is a history of cooperation, and acceptance of all group members exists. Cohesiveness is in large part the result of people socially constructing a positive culture using some tools such as the two we have discussed tonight.

I challenge you to look back on great groups and organizations that you have been a part of and reflect on these key points of positive culture. Also realize that there are many more ways to socially construct the culture within your organization. I have named only two this evening but I challenge you to discover other ways on your own. Notice how they differ in each situation and make them a part of your next organization. Remember you are in charge of your own culture. Creating your own positive culture is up to you. So construct a positive organizational culture and get more out of every organization and group you are a part of! Thank you!

## References

Ball State University, (Nov. 1998). "1998 Freshman Year Experience Survey Summary Report". Office of Academic Assessment.

Ball State University, (Nov. 1998). "1998 Senior Survey of May Graduates Summary Report". Office of Academic Assessment.

Ball State University, (Jan. 1999). "Making Achievement Possible Summary Findings 1998 and 1997". Office of Academic Assessment.

Bolman, L. G., & Deal, T.E., (1991). Reframing Organizations. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Conquergood, D. (1994). "Homeboys & Hoods: Gang Communication and Cultural Space". In Frey, L.R. (Ed.), Group Communication in Context: Studies of Natural Groups. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbrown Associates. pp. 23-55.

Eisenberg, E.M., & Goodall, H. L. Jr.. (1997). Organizational Communication (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Frost, P. J., Moore, L. F., Louis, M. R., Lundberg, C. C., & Martin, J., (1991). Reframing Organizational Culture. Newbury Park: Sage.

Green, E. M., (1997). A First Look at Communication Theory (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Jones, M. O., (1996). Studying Organizational Symbolism. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Karasik, P., (1992). How to Make It Big in the Seminar Business. New York: McGraw-Hill.

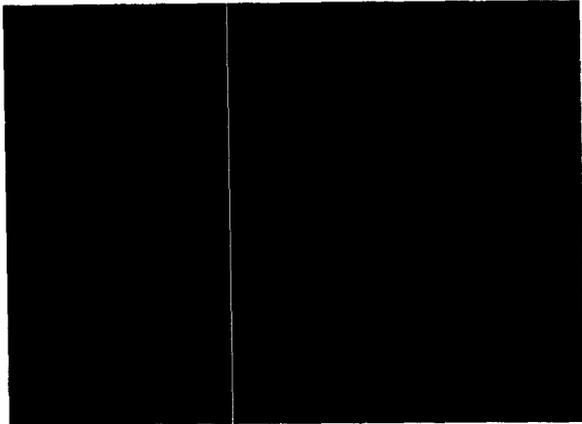
Lustig, M. W., Koester, J., (1996). Intercultural Competence (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: HarperCollins College.

Pascarella, E. & Terenzini, P., (1991). How College Affects Students. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rothwell, J.D., (1995). In Mixed Company (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace College.

Smith, R. C. & Eisenberg, E.M. (1987). "Conflict at Disneyland: A Root-Metaphor Analysis". In Communication Monographs, vol. 54, Dec. 1987. pp.367-379.

# **Power Point Presentation**



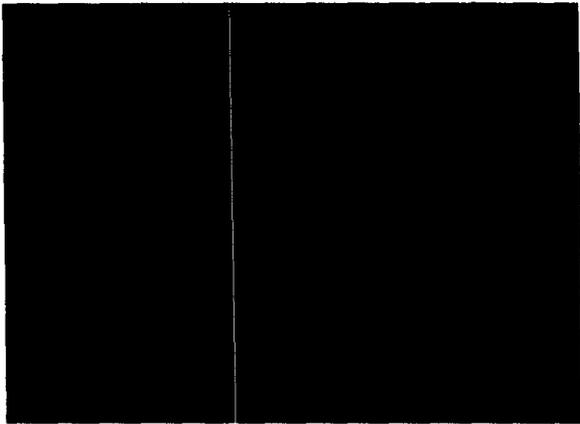
# Group Construction

- ## Formation of Positive Culture
- Rituals
  - Language
  - Cooperation and Cohesion

## Social Construction

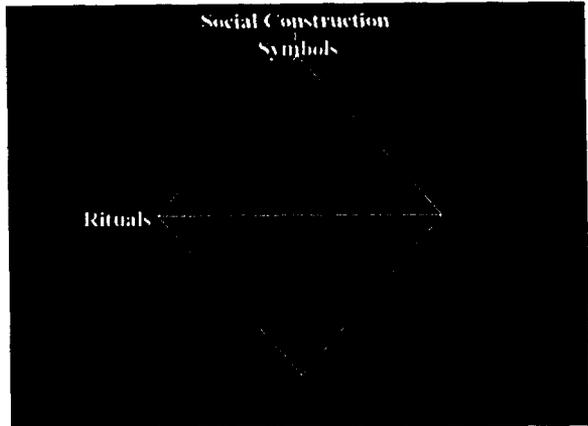
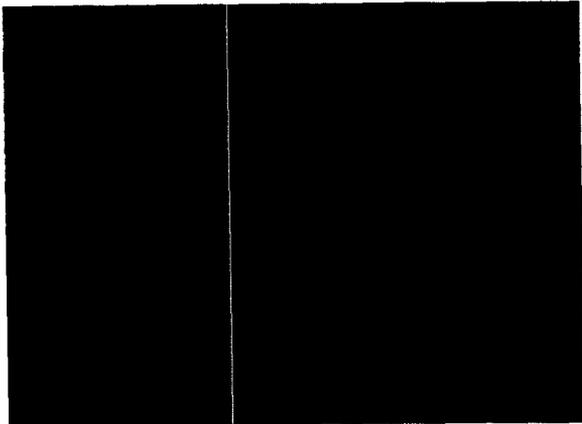
By the time Ball State students reach their senior year approximately 50% have been involved in a student group at some time during their college career.

Office of Academic Assessment, Ball State University

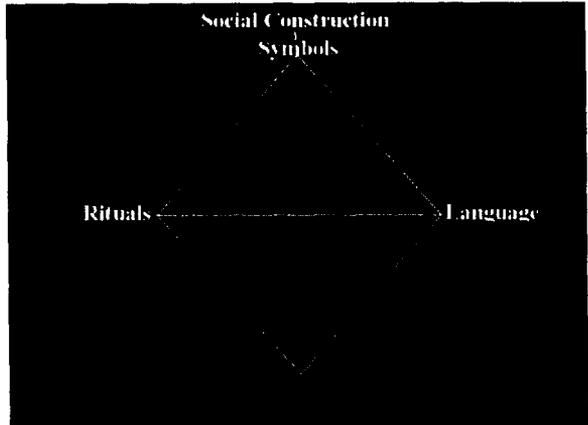


## Symbols

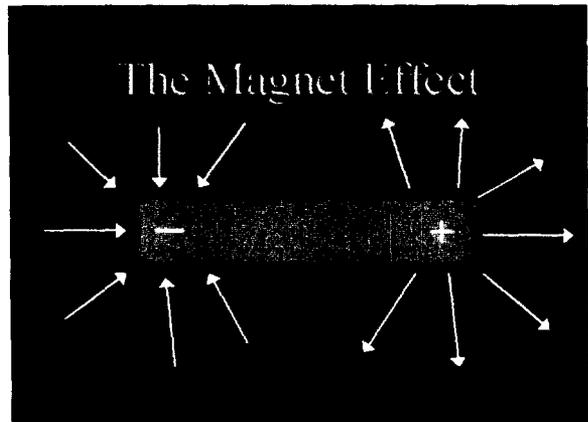
Symbols are stimuli that have learned meaning and value for people.



- ## Rituals
- Socialize
  - Stabilize
  - Reduce anxieties and ambiguities
  - Convey messages to outsiders

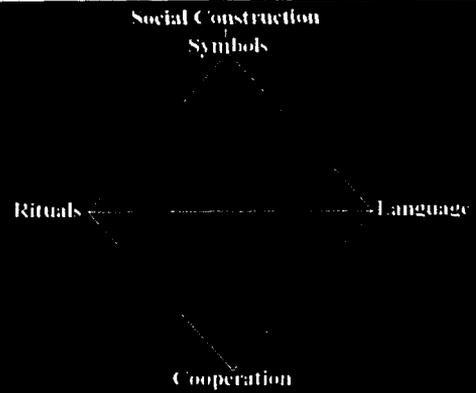


- ## Language
- Positive and Negative
  - Magnet Effect



## Language

- Positive and Negative
- Magnet Effect
- Metaphors

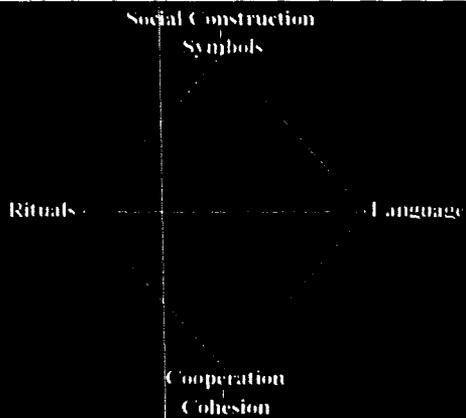


"If we sink or swim together, then it serves the interests of all parties to assist one another in treading water"

-Rothwell-

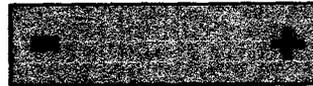
## Cooperation

- Group goals
- Division of labor
- Distribution of rewards
- Individual accountability of group members



# Challenge Card

*How do you construct your  
culture?*



**Magnet Effect**