
The etymology of 'corporate predatorship': A critical commentary

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Abstract (Article Summary)

The deployment of the word "predator," when used in connection with corporations, is imbued with considerable ideological baggage. More specifically, it is driven by a metaphorical imperative that serves to legitimate and "normalize" corporate activity.

Full Text (1978 words)

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What is a corporate predator? From a semiotic perspective, what does this term 'denote' and 'connote' (Eco, 1979)? The line of argument developed here is that the deployment of the word 'predator', when used in connection with corporations, is imbued with considerable ideological baggage. More specifically, it is driven by a metaphorical imperative that serves to legitimate and 'normalize' corporate activity.

There are two main parts to this brief commentary. First, I wish to elaborate upon the notion of the corporate predator as metaphor. Second, I wish to consider the wider implications of this form of 'analogical correspondence' for both corporations and the critical postmodern organization science agenda.

The Corporate Predator: A Metaphor taken Literally?

Metaphor proceeds on the basis that "A is (or is like) B" (Morgan, 1986:13). As Davidson puts it: "A metaphor makes us attend to some likeness, often a novel or surprising likeness, between two or more things" (1978: 31). Moreover, the application of a particular metaphor, as a concrete 'base' or 'source' domain (Ortony, 1993), enables either new or deeper insights into an abstract 'target' domain (Ortony, 1993) to be generated (Grant and Oswick, 1996; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

The central theme of this paper rests upon the premise that the use of the term 'predator' within a corporate context is a borrowed one. In short, it is a metaphor. The original definition, and conventional interpretation, of a predator is: "An animal that normally preys on others; an animal that habitually catches and eats prey" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1993). At some point in time this 'concrete' domain (i.e. a predacious animal) was projected onto an 'abstract' domain (i.e. corporate activity) on the basis of certain resemblances or similarities. However, metaphorical projections are not just about aspects of 'sameness'- they rely upon a concurrent process of inclusion and exclusion. For example, Clarke and Salaman point out that in describing an athlete as being like a leopard, we "conjure up specific images of an animal moving with explosive speed, power, strength and grace" (1996: 163), and we "ignore the fact that a leopard is a wild animal with feline features, yellow and black spotted fur, four legs, claws and a tail" (1996: 163164).

According to Gareth Morgan, the juxtaposing of similarity and difference that metaphor permits is where the creative power of the process resides (Morgan 1980: 1996). Other proponents of

metaphor have drawn attention to their 'generative' (Schon, 1993), 'transformational' (Srivastva and Barrett, 1988) and 'liberating' (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990) potential. However, the generation of fresh perspectives and new insight is not de facto a positive phenomenon. For some critical commentators, the proliferation of metaphors within the field of organization theory has been challenged on the basis that they 'obscure and mislead' (Tsoukas, 1993) and 'reify and act as ideological distortions' (Tinker, 1986). Consequently, it is to this latter perspective that we now turn our attention.

From Imagery to Ideology?

Arguably, the most significant point of similarity between the animal kingdom and the corporate world is the notion that having bigger, and often powerful, animals, preying on smaller more vulnerable ones equates to large corporations dominating or subsuming smaller organizations. For advocates of metaphor, this kind of projection produces strong and evocative imagery. That said, the image is tempered by an implicit acknowledgement that there are also obvious points of dissimilarity (e.g. a predator is a single unitary organism while a corporation is constituted through a plurivocal collection of living beings). There is also a 'taken-for-granted' understanding that the projected attributes are not literal ones (e.g. a large corporation does not actually 'eat' smaller companies).

From a modernist perspective, characteristics of similarity and dissimilarity, such as those indicated above, can be clearly delineated and the separation of the literal attributes and contrived ones is seen as unproblematic. However, in practice the process of omission and commission that occurs is inherently ambiguous and value-- loaded. In the case of the 'corporation as predator' metaphor there are distinct layers to the suppression and promotion of the attributes portrayed as 'shared characteristics'.

At a surface level, the depiction of the corporation as a predator is a decidedly negative one (i.e. a large organization dominating a smaller one). At a deeper level, there is perhaps a far more subtle and sophisticated connection at work. The behaviour of predatory animals is perceived as both 'natural' and 'necessary'. A predatory animal has to eat in order to survive. Furthermore, devouring other animals is an instinctive rather than cognitive process. In short, being a predatory animal is not primarily a life style choice. Through their public discourse, corporations seek to represent themselves in a similar light-the corporatist domination of other small more vulnerable organizations is cleverly framed as 'natural' and 'unavoidable'. Underpinning this perspective is the imperative of competition "the right of the strongest" and "the survival of the fittest". This resonates with the immanent logic of 'winning' and 'surviving' that is deeply embedded within corporate rhetoric. In this regard, corporations in general, and corporate predatorship in particular, can be seen as merely reflecting the norms of social-- Darwinism which pervade society as a whole.

In actuality, corporations, unlike predatory animals, do have a considerable amount of discretion and choice regarding their actions (i.e. their behaviour is not given and, hence, unavoidable) and the concept of 'naturalness' is merely a privileged and partial construction of reality. The 'corporate colonization' (Deetz, 1992) of the predator metaphor, is especially adroit in terms of the levels of meaning created. As indicated above, at an overt level (i.e. the denotation), being a corporate predator is not generally perceived as positive. But, at a covert level (i.e. the connotations), it is carried off as natural and legitimate. As is generally the case with subliminal forms of advertising, it is by targeting this secondary 'covert' level that most meaningfully conveys the desired 'corporate message' because it is aimed at the unconscious and can, therefore, be absorbed without meeting any direct resistance.

It becomes difficult to disentangle the denotation of the 'corporate predator' from the connotations engendered by the 'predatory animal'. In many ways, this actually extends beyond the notion of

'naturalness' to incorporate other ideological entailments (such as the 'poise', 'stealth' and 'gracefulness' of predators). Here one thinks of highly evocative imagery (e.g. a soaring eagle suddenly diving down onto a shimmering lake and flying off with a salmon between its claws, or a cheetah slowly stalking and aggressively chasing an antelope). It seems to me to be deeply ironic that these sorts of expansive and idealized images stand in stark contrast to those that they overshadow (e.g. the scenes of despair and danger found in third world sweatshops).

In a recent survey into the use of metaphor within a large multinational (Oswick and Montgomery, 1999), employees (n = 98) were asked to compare their organisation to an animal. The responses revealed that those who held a positive view of the organisation consistently drew on "images of lean, fast moving, and often predatory animals to portray a turbulent environment and a responsive organisation" (Oswick and Montgomery, 1999: 507). By contrast, those respondents holding a predominantly negative perception of the company presented images of cumbersome, slow moving animals, such as elephants and whales. The findings of this study serve to illustrate how predatory behaviour has been colonized to the extent that workers embrace and espouse decidedly favourable conceptualisations of predatorship. Hence, it would seem that far from being a troublesome construct, predatory behaviour is seen as legitimate, highly valued and inextricably linked to corporate success.

Emancipation: The Last Word?

It is easy to see why corporations would seek to promulgate the use of the predator metaphor. It is less easy to see why academics within the 'critical postmodern organization science' community would also choose to do so. Given the way that discourse circulates in contested spaces, it could be argued that such usage may represent an attempt to subvert the privileged interpretation and engender resistance. An illustration of this form of counter-framing of language is the usage of 'Third World' by postcolonial people to overtly acknowledge the racism of the terminology and to use it to label their critique. Similarly, the use of 'black' by African-Americans and 'queer' by the gay community are examples of this process of revealing, resisting and contesting the dominant and 'taken-for-granted' meanings associated with particular words. That said, there is little evidence to suggest that 'critical postmodernists' are either consciously or unconsciously subverting the meaning of 'predatorship'.

In my opinion, continuing to talk of 'corporate predators', as is the case with the title and theme of this special issue, plays into the hands of corporate capitalism. My intention here is not to criticize the content of contributions contained in this volume, or to question the motives of the authors, it is merely to draw attention to the embedded implications of the 'predatorship discourse'. Moreover, I want us to lay claim to our own meanings in this realm of corporate activity. Not least because as Taylor and Van Every succinctly put it: "Words matter" (2000: 20).

To this end, and in direct opposition to 'corporate-speak', we ought to mobilize counter-ideological metaphors, such as: 'corporate pillaging', 'corporate plundering', 'corporate theft' and 'corporate rape'. These descriptors clearly evoke very different metaphorical images. Ultimately, words are central to any emancipatory endeavour. After all, as Ken Gergen reminds us: "As we describe, explain or otherwise represent, so do we fashion our future" (1999: 48).

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