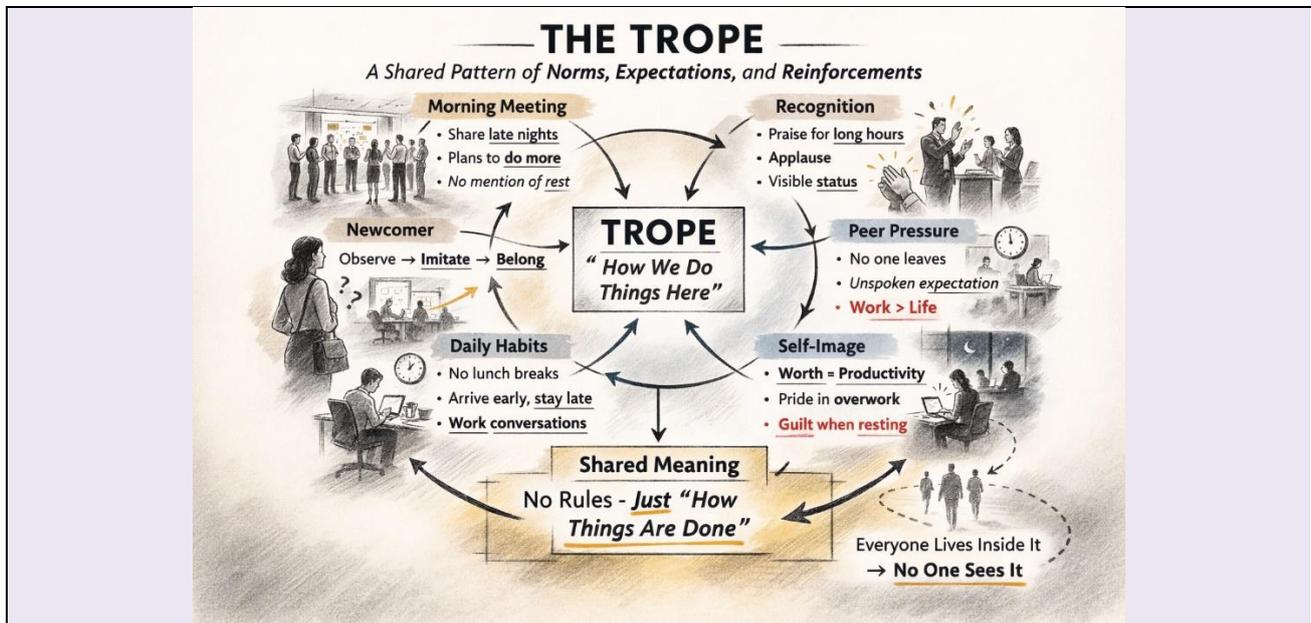# MR-09 Tropes

The Meeting

When Lena joined the company, she was invited to the morning meeting on her very first day. Everyone stood in a circle and spoke in turn about what they had done the night before and what they planned to do that evening. Some mentioned working late. Others mentioned coming in early. No one mentioned resting. Lena listened carefully and, when it was her turn, said she was still learning. People smiled politely.

At lunchtime, she noticed that most people ate at their desks. Conversations were brief and often about work. When someone apologised for taking a full lunch break, others nodded with understanding. "No problem," they said. "It gets easier."

In the evening, as she packed her bag, she noticed many people were still working. No one told her to stay, but no one left. She sat back down.

At the end of the week, there was another meeting. This one ended differently. The manager thanked those who had worked late, who had come in early, and who had gone beyond expectations. The group applauded. Lena applauded too. It felt natural. Right.

Weeks passed. She began arriving earlier and staying later. She spoke about it in meetings. Others nodded. They applauded. She felt proud, recognised, part of something.

One evening, she paused before opening her laptop at home. She was tired. She closed it again. The next morning, when she spoke in the circle, she did not mention working the night before. No one criticised her, but no one applauded. The moment passed quickly, but she felt it.

Months later, Lena stood in the circle, listening to a new employee speak. He said he had stayed late. People nodded. They applauded. Lena applauded too. And in that moment, she understood something she had never been told. It was not the meeting, or the long hours, or the applause. It was all of it together — each small act, each quiet signal, each shared understanding. None of it required. All of it expected. And because everyone lived inside it, no one could see it clearly. It was simply how things were done.

Formal Description
A Trope is an emergent, shared cognitive framework formed through the partial alignment and overlap of schemata across individuals within a group or society. Tropes operate at a higher level of abstraction than individual beliefs or schemata and function as culturally stabilised patterns of meaning that shape norms, values, narratives, and expectations. Once established, tropes influence belief formation, interpretation, and behaviour at scale, often without explicit awareness by individual agents.

Plain English Explanation
Tropes are the *shared stories and assumptions* that feel "obvious" in a culture.
They are not usually written down or formally taught. Instead, they emerge when many people develop similar ways of interpreting the world. Over time, these shared patterns become normalised: they shape what seems reasonable, moral, respectable, or unthinkable.
Because tropes feel like common sense, they are rarely questioned — which makes them powerful, but also dangerous when they become outdated, distorted, or deliberately exploited.
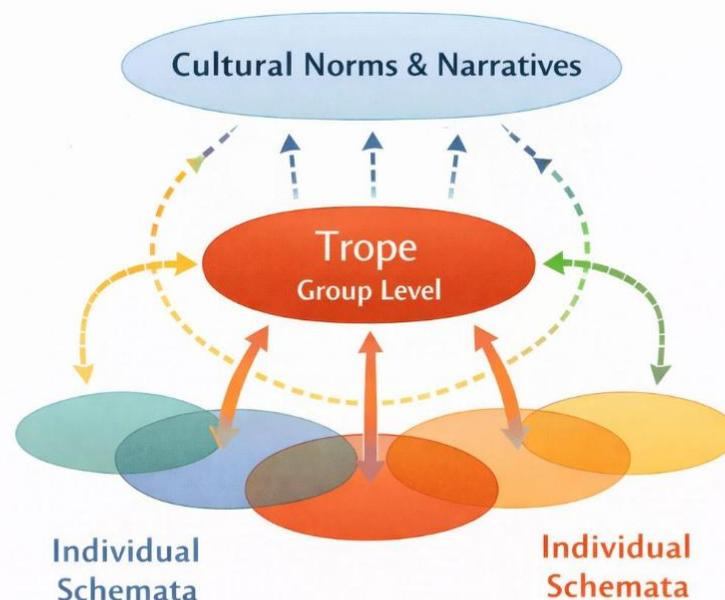
Example 1 – Cultural / Societal

The trope *"Success equals constant productivity"* emerges from shared schemata around work, worth, and status. It shapes education, employment, and self-evaluation, even when individuals privately feel exhausted or unfulfilled.

Example 2 – Professional / Organisational

In some professions, a trope develops that *"emotions undermine professionalism."* This discourages honest discussion of stress, burnout, or ethical discomfort, reinforcing harmful practices without anyone explicitly endorsing them.

Provenance and Links

Theoretical foundations:

- **Schema aggregation:**
  Bartlett's schema theory provides the cognitive basis for shared interpretive frameworks.
- **Social construction of reality:**
  Berger and Luckmann's work explains how shared meanings become institutionalised and taken for granted.
- **Cultural cognition:**
  Research showing that group-level meaning systems shape individual perception and belief persistence.
- **Memetics and cultural evolution:**
  Although treated cautiously, these frameworks support the idea that patterns of meaning propagate and stabilise over time.

Systems and social theory integrations:

- **Emergence:**
  Tropes exemplify emergent properties arising from interactions among individual agents.
- **Morphogenetic theory:**
  Tropes correspond to the cultural layer in Archer's structure–culture–agency cycle.
- **Belief leverage:**
  Tropes provide the substrate through which beliefs can be scaled, reinforced, and exploited.

Links to other Knowledge Objects:

- Schemata
- Belief Formation
- Needs-Driven Belief
- Culture
- Belief Leverage

Exercise: Identifying a Dominant Trope

1. Think of a belief that "everyone seems to agree with" in your workplace, community, or society.
2. Write it as a simple statement (e.g. *"Good people always put others first."*).
3. Ask:
   - What behaviours does this trope encourage?
   - What behaviours does it quietly discourage?
4. Reflect:
   - Who benefits most from this trope?

       ○ Who bears the cost?
5. Consider whether this trope still serves its original purpose.

The aim is to make the *invisible visible*.