

## Narrative and Organizations

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Given the power of language to mediate meaning and thereby construct subject and object (Barclay, 1994; Bruner, 1986), it seems apropos that organizations be thought of as also constructed through language. Regarding this Brown, Humphreys, and Gurney (2005) said,

The term “organization” is a spatial metaphor that implicates a shared discursive space in which meanings are ascribed to, and understandings produced of, actors, events, actions, and contexts. Organizations are pluralistic and polyphonic accomplishments in which multiple and diverse understandings and language practices occur simultaneously and sequentially. (p. 313)

Humans use narrative and take its sensemaking ability into their endeavors (Currie & Brown, 2003; Schiffrin, 1996). Finding narrative within organizations should not, then, be surprising. What could be a matter of reflection is the myriad ways human actors reflect their will through narrative and by it impose that will upon others or are themselves imposed upon (Mumby, 1987). Dawson and Buchanan (2005) spoke to this saying that narratives can hold power beyond their truth bearing to the “re-scripting of histories in justifying, directing, shaping and steering processes” (p. 845). In this light and as human agencies constituted through narrative, organizations could also be thought of as collectors and distributors of human will in narrative form. The revealing of human will narratively within organizations is a form of power albeit one based in meaning (Mumby, 1987; Mumby & Stohl, 1991).

Mumby (1987) underscored this point saying that narrative does more than convey information within organizations but rises to an ideologic practice whereby “meaning formations are produced” (p.118). For Currie and Brown (2003) narrative’s shared meanings form “knowledge structures” (p. 564) and for Brown et al., narrative within organizations becomes the “structures” through which action is given purpose (2005, p. 313). In this thought narrative in organizations is defining of reality, consensive of practices, an enduring social fabric (Martin, 1986; Mumby, 1987), motivational for human actors (Nelson, 2001), and generative of mutuality (Currie & Brown, 2003). As a form of power, then, narrative is not solely the monologic exercise of the loudest or even dominant (Brown & McMillan, 1991) but the influence of storytellers who gather into their narrative folds all who listen. Brown, et al. (2005) stated,

Organizations are the intersection of multiple and diverse discursive resources that can be drawn on by participants, and which promote plurivocality. Thus, although organizations exert pervasive controls over participants, and may sometimes be able to colonize them from the inside to create engineered or designer selves, such totalitarianism rarely goes unquestioned, and is never complete. In short, senior managers’ control over discursive space cannot be total, and this is one reason why organizations are best theorized as

polyphonic rather than monological locales of power. (p. 322)

For Churchman (2006) this organizational polyphony is the result of “language communities existing within a larger community” (p. 12) formed and maintained by member’s co-produced stories (Boje, 1991a). This comports with Ford (1999) who held that instead of monolithicity, organizations are “pluralistic and polyphonic with many conversations occurring simultaneously and sequentially” (p. 485). In addition, Hopkinson (2003) held the possibility that language communities are sites of meaning that enable members to define their organization. These narrating actions result in an organizational identity that members use to complement their individual identities (Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

### *Narrative and Identity*

Organizational identity then is an amalgam of the organization’s narratives and myths. It represents what an organization does and “reflects the underlying values, assumptions, philosophies, and expectations of organizational life” (Hopkins, Hopkins, & Mallette, 2005, p. 17). What may appear cacophonous psychically is the process members use to arrive at a shared understanding of the organization (Addleson, 2000). Like that of individuals, the identity of organizations is constituted by “continuously evolving shared narratives” (Brown et al., 2005, p. 313). This identity is “never final but continuously constructed” as the organization’s members contribute to its ongoing development through additions of their own narratives (p. 1944). The result is that the organization becomes a unique expression that the individual identifies with. Members aided in their personal identity formation by the organizational identity they have constructed will at a deeper psychological level define “the social identity component of their self-concepts” by drawing “on the salient images they associate with their work organization. As a result, their personal self-esteem is thus tied intimately to the identity of their organization” (Humphreys & Brown, 2002, p. 424). In a similar vein Addleson (2000) stated:

People understand social life in conversations, which have language, relationships with others—such as family, friends, or colleagues—as well as “cultures” and communities as their ground. Businesses or other named organizations, such as churches, prisons, clubs, and offices, where people do a variety of things together, are aspects of this social life-world. (p. 237)

As individuals know themselves and gain identity through stories, so too do organizations (Ashforth & Mael, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Phinney, 2000). Acting as the “sub-texts” of organizational culture, that is, the underlying story which the members having helped construct are also aware of, organizational narratives “embed all members in a network” (Brown & McMillan, 1991, pp. 50-51) and produce an identity to which members can adhere collectively. This collectivizing, narrative producing, organization is itself a story (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Patriotta, 2003) and likely rooted in both paradigmatic and narrative interpretive schemes. Paradigmatic knowledge is Bruner’s (1986) term for his logico-scientific mode of knowing that is in contrast to what he called the “narrative mode.” Paradigmatic knowledge looks for universal truth conditions while attempting to “fulfill the ideal of a formal, mathematical

system of description and explanation” whereas the narrative mode looks for connections between events (p. 12). Richardson (1990) continued the thought by saying, “the narrative code ‘demonstrates’ narrative reasoning, the type of reasoning that understands the whole by the integrations of its parts, whereas the logico-scientific code demonstrates empiricist reasoning, the type of reasoning that ‘proves’ statements” (p. 118). In consideration of the social influence of organizations the distinction could be of importance.

### *The Nature of the Story*

It appears human tendency, at least from a Western/modern point of view, is to mechanize all that we do not understand. While the statement is broad it may also reveal what could be one aspect of Western society’s heritage in the Enlightenment. Mechanism’s approach to phenomena is one of explanation by appeal to physics and chemistry. As used in Czarniawska’s (1997) argument it refers to the belief and practice that phenomena are singularly defined, i.e. “words refer directly to phenomena in the real world” (p. 152). Czarniawska takes this observation to elicit a comparison between organizations and organisms and between the constructionist versus modernist/mechanistic paradigms as method for interpreting organizations.

Recognizing that organizations do not completely conform to the rules governing organisms, yet the vocabulary used to describe them is rich in biologic metaphor, Czarniawska (1997) opts for one rooted among anthropology, literature, and sociology. The problem with biological metaphor in her view is that its terms aren’t as applicable to organizational life as theorists would suggest, particularly in adaptation and boundaries. Adaptation refers to the ability to become better suited to an environment whereas boundary is the ability to remain separate from that environment. While comparisons should be viewed as approximate, the tensions organizations experience in adapting to new social or economic environments as well as the tendency for boundaries to be challenged by “mergers, acquisitions, transnationals and networks make such an idea appear highly tenuous (p. 3).” The biological metaphor however, is not without some justification.

Writing from a biological science perspective, Ruiz-Marizo and Moreno (2004) held that fundamentally life is organized and reproduces itself in an act of “autopoiesis” (p. 235) meaning to auto-create. Autopoiesis has three requirements: “a semipermeable active boundary (i.e., a membrane), an energy transduction/conversion apparatus (a set of energy currencies), and at least one type of functional component controlling and facilitating self-construction processes (catalysts).” A “minimal organizational logic” would include autopoiesis as well as additional “material and energetic” elements to be sustaining (p. 252).

Governments have authorized the establishment of corporations/organizations with a minimum of requirements, namely, a slate of officers, usually 3, and Articles of Incorporation. This nascent organization could be analogous to the autopoietic function in that it is minimal, it is permeable, that is, others will enter as some exit eventually leading to a new slate of officers, it is able to expend energy as well as receive it in the form of labor and finance, and its establishment provides definition or catalyst to its function. Further, the additional requirements

needed to meet the minimal logic standard could be seen in its production. It's likely then that Czarniawska's (1997) reference is to the application of biology's terms rather than their definitions. While acknowledging, "the main source of knowledge in the practice of organizing is narrative" (p. 6), Czarniawska is drawn to recast its explication in terms away from the mechanism of modernity. A constructionist view is better suited to her chosen vocabulary pools of anthropology, literature, and sociology.

As art, constructivism may be known for the combining of real mechanical objects in an abstract frame (Czarniawska, 1997). Its essence is abstracted in this discussion so that constructivism refers to what is observed as being "created and recreated in the interaction" (p. 153). The distinction between mechanism and constructionism is one of interpretation and holds importance if the narrative intrinsic to organizations is to be fully defining. Calling constructivism "interpretive," Czarniawska said it represents "an approach in the social sciences that comes closest to the narrative knowledge" while mechanism supplies "paradigmatic knowledge" (p. 55).

For Czarniawska (1997) the distinction is critical because narrative within organizations as well as human sociality is "dramatized stories, in which the participants are actors, authors, directors, and producers (p. 13). At stake in the mode of interpretation of either paradigmatic or narrative is the range of human action (Boje, 1991b), itself the exemplar of narrative within organization (Carr, 2001). Said another way, "conversations in particular, and human actions in general, are enacted narratives" (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 13). Ong (1982) pointed to the orality of non-literate cultures as contributing to the narrativizing tendency within human sociality. While the narrative mode is in some form deconstructive of modernity's paradigm (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) it may be so for good reason. By interpreting action and the narrative that informs it through the narrative mode we return to orality's essence: an acknowledgement of our connectedness (McAdams, 1996). In the process we acknowledge our embeddedness in narrative (Boje, 1991b; Pals, 2006) and our lives as interpretable rather than interpreted. Boje (2001) also acknowledged the "crisis of narrative in modernity" within organizations (p. 1). But rather than an appeal for a different worldview, his solution was to recast our view of narrative as antenarrative, narrative, and story with clear delineation between forms of narrative and story.

Boje (2001) developed the above concept to aid in the analysis of organizational antenarratives of which he found eight varieties. Although analysis is not in view in this discussion, his premise bears upon the presence and role of narrative in organizations. In a nod to the narrative mode of interpretation, Boje referred to the stories of organizations as "self-deconstructing, flowing, emerging and networking" (p. 1). These are multivocal, the efforts of a collective, and gain the title "antenarrative" by being before the narrative, acting as descriptive accounts but without the benefit of plot. Their importance lies in the distinction Boje has defined for them. Antenarratives are stories: diffuse as opposed to neat and tidy, folksy instead of technical. When absent plot and coherence they are anti-narrative, that is, refusing to be coherent. And antenarratives are the "storytelling spaces" that the "folk of organizations inhabit" (p. 2). In disagreement with Czarniawska (1997) that stories have plot, Boje turned to Gallie for a definition of story that is descriptive but non-plotting.

Boje's (2001) position is a departure from the prevalent view of narrative as synonymous with story (Bal, 1997). However, within organizational narrative research this view may owe its acceptance to the understanding narrative brings from literary studies, social psychology, and anthropology (Czarniawska, 1997). Boje (2001) found disparity between the coherent, ordered, even structured, narrative of the social sciences (Blum-kula, 1993; Ezzy, 1998; Linde, 1993; Martin, 1986; McAdams, 1993; Mishler, 2006) and the stories exchanged between real people in real organizations. Here "fragmented and multi-layered experiences of desire" replace coherence (p. 2). Interestingly and with possible overtones for feminist studies, Tuval-Mashiach, (2006) attributed fragmented story to women while saying that men produce clear and well-defined plots. Certainly the issue in antenarrative of polyphony over order and description over coherence is greater than gender and may stem from an evolutionary patterning within humans for community and affinity (Dunbar, 1996). All else could be attributed to socialization.

To aid in locating antenarrative Boje (2001) identified five characteristics. First, it is the story before any imposition of formal narrative structure such as plot or "beginning, middle and end" (p. 3). Second, antenarrative makes space for speculation but does so as an object of sensemaking. Currie and Brown (2003) after Leiter, whom they cited, posited that sensemaking was an intersubjective process of reflection leading to interpretation of phenomena. In this vein, "one way in which we collectively make sense of (or enact) our social world is through jointly negotiated narratives" (p. 564). Thirdly, antenarrative is to experience the story as opposed to experiencing a narrative pre-packaged for consumption. Fourthly, antenarrative is descriptive of storytelling in organizations through highlighting the "plurivocal interpretation of organizational stories in a distributed and historically contextualized meaning network" – what Boje (2001) termed "wandering discourses." These are the stories and their exercise in a form of sensemaking that is "coming into being, but not finished or concluded" (p. 4). Fifthly, antenarrative is the story in its own process of coming-to-be. It serves to reflect the organization's complete but never finished collective memory, itself an amalgam of members multiple stories of the same event. As Czarniawska (1997) who recognized the need for a new paradigm and Boje (2001) who sought to parse narrative, Gabriel (2000, 2004) offered an approach that seemed to depart from the broad acceptance narrative has enjoyed in organizational studies. Like Bruner (2001) who found a "folk" psychology in narrative's shadow, Gabriel appeals to the story of folklore in place of the narrative commonly thought to exist in organizations.

For Gabriel (2004) narrative functions best in the "managed organization." "Managed" is not an adjective that describes professionalism but one denoting the discursive space of official organizational narratives. In contrast, the folklore he propounds is the ordinary stories of conversation, anger and animus, joy and satisfaction that exist outside of any official narrative. In this sense folklore is unmanaged and in addition to any official narrative of the organization. Gabriel stated,

Stories like these do not belong to the managed terrains of organization, but they are part of an unmanaged organization, where they may surface from time to time and

collide with, avoid, or merge with each other. In this unmanaged organization, desire takes precedence over actuality, emotion over rationality, and fantasy over literal fact... such stories build on official organizational stories, develop them, and qualify them. (p. 4)

Although Gabriel's position that stories are narrative with plot differs from Boje's (2001), what may be of greater issue is the idea that each suggests: story is in addition to official narrative and is the creation of member's conversation.

A second point where Gabriel (2004) digresses from Boje (2001) is in the latter's assertion that organizations are storytelling affairs (p. 2). Gabriel takes the exception saying that rather than the organization being a storytelling space, that is, the dominant sensemaking community for members, it is instead one of unmanaged conversations where official narrative can be challenged (p. 25). Further, within organizations narrative is naturally inhibited for at least two reasons: a) member's time and thereby their ability for conversation can be limited by the organization, and b) we simply do not have the same storytelling ability as our forebears.

The overall historical appeal of folklore is in its entertaining value and as method of dissemination. In modernity folklore is symbolic and a conveyor of meaning; in post-modernity it is necessary to sensemaking (Gabriel, 2000). While organizations "possess a living folklore" still it functions as one genre among others. So while its prominence may not be assured its place is and that place distinguished by its symbolicity, spontaneity, and reproducibility (p. 22). As such, folklore represents "facts-as-experience" as opposed to "facts-as-information" (p. 27). Though the folk stories of organizations are distinct from narrative they may become a narrative, revealing if the prerogatives of leadership are the priorities of members. In this way the actual "political, psychological, and social issues in organizations" are visible (p. 29). Warning that culture in general and organizational culture in particular may not be a unifying force nor internalized by members, Gabriel positioned folklore not only as cohesive but also as the "basis of resistance and opposition" (p. 90).

Gabriel (2000) after Propp, whom he cited, held that folklore, in a Marxian view, is the tool of the under privileged and even the oppressed whereas art and literature are those of the privileged. In this sense folklore expresses "protest and defiance" (p. 111) and could be the reason why "the majority of stories in fact tend to diminish or vilify organizations instead of idealizing them" Particularly in "oppressive, exploitative, no-nonsense organizations" where "jokes, stories, and gossip are indispensable mechanisms of psychological survival" (p. 91). The comparison to leader and led, though not his directly, is unavoidable and even more so when his folklore cannot be "institutionalized or domesticated into a hegemonic culture" is considered (p. 111). A contrary view is that of Dundes who held that any group with a common, shared story will have folklore (Gabriel 2000). In contrast to the Marxism of Propp (Gabriel, 2000), this folklore is decidedly Freudian as we unwittingly express through folklore what would otherwise be socially unacceptable.

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