

# Narrative, organizations and research

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Given the rapid expansion of narrative approaches in management and organization theory in recent years, this paper investigates the contribution of this literature to the understanding of organizations and processes of organizing. The paper tells the story of the development of narrative approaches in organizational theory. Narrative's contribution to substantive areas of organization theory is evaluated. These developments are then reviewed in relation to an ongoing tension between story and science. We conclude by contemplating some of the criticisms, and the future, of narrative research.

## Introduction

What is a good story worth? In a famous exchange of views published in the *Academy of Management Review* in 1991, Dyer and Wilkins argued that, not only was the point of case research to produce an 'exemplar', 'a story against which researchers can compare their experiences and gain rich theoretical insights' (p. 613), but that the 'classics' in organization studies 'are good stories' (p. 617). In reply, Eisenhardt (1991) contended that stories are not theories, and while '[g]ood storytelling may make ... studies entertaining to read ... their theoretical impact comes from rigorous method and multiple-case comparative logic' (p. 621). This dialogue crystallizes a key theme that has come to characterize the development of narrative research in organization theory – the ongoing tension between stories and science. To explore this, we tell the story of the development of narrative research and assess the contribution it has made to organization theory more generally. Piecing together this story is important because, despite the burgeoning

of the literature on narrative since 1991 (e.g. Boje 2001; Czarniawska 1999; Gabriel 2000), as yet there has been no attempt to assess systematically the value of this literature to our understanding of processes of organizing, or to consider critically its impact on our field.

In telling the story of narrative research, we recognize that our story, rather than just being a passive rendering of events, assumes 'the double role of mimesis-mythos' (Kearney 2002, 12). That is, a story, unlike a chronology – a list of events in date order – is a 'creative re-description of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold' (*ibid.*, 12). An important implication of this observation is that any particular series of events can be incorporated in many different stories, each of which is susceptible to multiple interpretations (Rhodes 2001a). To author a story is always a creative act, and our story is just one of many that could be told about narrative research. Ours is not a quest for scientific truth, but a quest for meaning. This is a key issue that will form a main theme of the paper. In our terms,

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the 'fact' that any series of events can be narrated in a plurality of ways is less of a 'problem' for research; it is an issue that has as its core how researchers should take responsibility for their work (Rhodes and Brown 2005). We have chosen to write this paper, to emplot the story of narrative research, in order that it might be better understood, appreciated and interrogated by those who use it. In these ways, we hope to contribute to existing methodological dialogues.

The value of narrative methodologies is by no means undisputed. Even scholars who conduct case study research often express a profound unease when it is suggested that their preferred representational strategy is a kind of story, and that such stories may appropriately be evaluated against literary criteria. As Lieblisch *et al.* (1998, 1) have asserted, frequently the study of narrative 'has been criticized as being more art than research'. Why art is not of value as knowledge is more often assumed than argued. It is to question such assumptions that we review and assess the impact of the concept and associated theories of narrative within organization studies. This task is important and overdue, not only because of the large number of studies that now adopt the methods and vocabulary associated with various narratologies, but also because it is valuable for us to reflect on, and to problematize, the ways in which the organization theory literature is developing. We start by introducing the notion of narrative and tracing its development in organizational theory. We then examine five major areas of inquiry where narrative has been used in organization theory: (1) sensemaking, (2) communication, (3) politics and power, (4) learning/change, and (5) identity and identification. We next discuss the main theoretical contributions and limitations of this research before concluding with an assessment of criticisms, future challenges and possible directions. In so doing, we make the point that organization theory is still limited by a meta-theoretical perspective that sees science and stories as separate domains, rather than different forms of knowledge. It is this unresolved conflict

that characterizes the unfinished story of the development of narrative research.

### Narrative in Social and Organizational Research

The development and use of narrative approaches is one symptom of the 'linguistic turn' that has occurred not just in organization studies but in the social sciences generally (Alvesson and Karreman 2000; Deetz 2003). Narratological concerns have been raised in disciplines as distinct as sociology (Ezzy 1998; Maines 1993; Somers 1994), history (Carr 1986; White 1987), various branches of psychology (Rappaport 2000; Sarbin 1986; White and Epston 1990), communication studies (Cooren 1999; Fisher 1984), folklore (Georges 1969; Robinson 1981), anthropology (Geertz 1988; Levi-Strauss 1963) and philosophy (Ricoeur 1983).

In organization theory in particular, it has been suggested that '[o]rganizational story and storytelling research has produced a rich body of knowledge unavailable through other methods of analysis' (Stutts and Barker 1999, 213), that the adoption of a narrative approach 'may increase the relevance of organizational knowledge produced by academics' (Ng and de Cock 2002, 25) and that the use of narrative approaches might encourage organization theory 'to reinvigorate itself' (Czarniawska 1998, 13). Boje (2001) has distinguished narratologies as distinct as living story, realism, formalism, pragmatism, social constructionism, poststructuralism, critical theory and postmodernism, each with its own preferred research agenda and constitutive assumptions. Yet, while the community for which narrative is a legitimate means of analysing and representing human relations is in some ways disparate (Riessman 1993, 16–17), it is cohered by a shared interest in work that 'is informed by or centers on narrativity' (Fisher 1985, 347), and research assumptions that favour pluralism, relativism and subjectivity (Lieblisch *et al.* 1998, 2). As Currie (1998) has argued, there is discernible 'an abstract pool of resources drawn eclectically from different narratological histories' (p. 14)

that forms 'a single body' (p. 27) which 'has converged into an increasingly shared vocabulary with increasingly similar objectives' (p. 135).

The history of narrative in organization research is relatively brief, and the diverse understandings and deployment of narrative in organization theory noted above are relatively recent occurrences. The earliest explicit uses of narrative approaches to inform research methodology in management and organization theory date from the 1970s (e.g. Clark 1972; Mitroff and Kilmann 1976, 1978). Most commonly such studies took as their methodological position that stories, myths, sagas and other forms of narrative were an overlooked yet valuable source of data for research in organizations. For example, in their 1976 study, Mitroff and Kilmann noted that, at the time, there had been little systematic study of organizational myths and stories, as this was not considered to be the 'proper focus of studies of the social sciences' (p. 191). Working against this dominant logic, they devised a research project which gathered short stories written by managers to express their concept of an ideal organization and compared it with the results of a short personality test based on a Jungian personality typology. Their methodological position was that stories gave the researcher access to the unconscious yet projective images of what the organization meant to the managers.

As the research focus on organizational culture and symbolism grew in the 1980s and 1990s, so did the use of narratives to explore the meaning of organizational experience. Researchers recognized that storytelling was an important means through which managers acquired knowledge at work and suggested that stories be taken as a credible source of knowledge by scholars (Hummel 1991). The emerging issue was how to use stories as 'devices which peer into human desires, wishes, hopes and fears ... [where] ... the best stories are those which stir people's minds, hearts and souls and by doing so give them new insights into themselves, their problems and their human condition. The challenge is to develop a human science that more fully serves

this aim' (Mitroff and Kilmann 1978). Building on arguments such as these, researchers sought new ways to incorporate stories into research. Often located within a social constructivist framework (Boyce 1996), the use of narratives as data enabled researchers to examine emotional and symbolic lives within organizations (Gabriel 1998; Van Buskirk and McGrath 1992).

Complementing the idea that people in organizations are storytellers and that their stories constituted valid empirical materials for research, a related methodological position soon began to be articulated which recognized that researchers, too, are storytellers. As well as pioneering new ways of using narratives as empirical materials, researchers have also developed new methodological positions in terms of the narrative nature of research itself. In reviewing case studies in organization and management theory, Dyer and Wilkins (1991) made the observation that such studies gain their power from their narrative elements rather than just their abstract concepts. They suggested that these stories use the theory as a plot and are highly effective and persuasive means of communicating research (especially in contrast to statistical demonstrations of theory). What was recognized was that disciplines in the social sciences ranging from sociology to ethnography and to organization studies had long been founded on the ability to tell a good story (Clegg 1993) such that, although not traditionally a trademark of scientific texts, narrative is always present in them (Czarniawska 1999). Research tended to use the term 'story' rather than 'narrative', to treat organizational stories as *in vivo* artefacts, and to emphasize that their importance derived from the insights they provided on other aspects of organization, such as how control is exercised (Wilkins 1983) and organizational distinctiveness claimed (Martin *et al.* 1983).

Today, narrative research is much more multi-faceted – narratives are recognized not only as a form of data (Mitroff and Kilmann 1976), but also as a theoretical lens (Pentland 1999), a methodological approach (Boje 2001), and various combinations of these.

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Narrative and its near conceptual neighbours such as story (Boje 1995), fantasy (Gabriel 1995), saga (Clark 1972) and myth (Kaye 1995) have been implicated in studies of processes of socialization (Brown 1982), learning (Tenkasi and Bolman 1993), strategic individuality (Harfield and Hamilton 1997), the exercise of power and control (Mumby 1987), sense-making (Brown 1986), culture formation (Jordan 1996), collective centring (Boyce 1996), community mediation (Cobb 1993), IT implementation (Brown 1998), and even the policy decisions of academic journals (Boje *et al.* 1996). This wealth of work from those who collect stories told in organizations (Martin *et al.* 1983), tell stories about organizations (Van Maanen 1988), define organizations as storytelling systems (Boje 1991a; Currie and Brown 2003), and conceptualize organization studies as a set of storytelling practices (Clegg 1993; Czarniawska 1999; Hatch 1996) is both indicative and constitutive of narrative's impact.

### Using Narrative Research to Study Organizations

To examine the substantive contribution of narrative research, in this section we continue our story by discussing five of the principal research areas within organization studies to which narrative has been directed: (1) sense-making, (2) communication, (3) learning/change, (4) politics and power, and (5) identity and identification. In considering these fields, we seek to demonstrate the depth and reach of the contribution of narrative to organization theory.

#### *Narrative Sensemaking*

There is a broad consensus among narrative scholars that sensemaking refers to processes of narrativization (MacIntyre 1981), that our versions of reality take narrative form (Bruner 1991), and that stories are means of interpreting and infusing events with meaning (Gabriel 2000). Further, the recognition that 'the performance of stories is a key part of members'

sensemaking' (Boje 1995, 1000) in organizations emphasizes that people understand complex events in ways which are integrated and temporally coherent rather than, for example, as atemporal and disconnected 'frameworks' (Cantril 1941, 20). As Weick (1995) argues, stories are pivotal to sensemaking because they aid comprehension, suggest a causal order for events, enable people to talk about absent things, act as mnemonics, guide action and convey shared values and meanings. There is a wealth of theoretical and empirical work that suggests stories help participants reduce 'the equivocality (complexity, ambiguity, unpredictability) of organizational life' (Brown and Kreps 1993, 48), are 'the main source of knowledge in the practice of organizing' (Czarniawska 1997, 5–6), and 'can be used to predict future organizational behavior' (Martin 1992, 287). Key to this is the use of narrative order to delineate emplotment and causality out of endemically chaotic and *dis-organized* (Cooper 1990) life at work. The presence of a plot in stories constructs the passage from one state of affairs to another (Czarniawska 2004) so that the sensemaking that is done through narrative will always be temporal rather than static.

A sensemaking perspective sees organizations are narratively constructed (Bruner 1991) from 'networks of conversations' (Ford 1999, 485). Within such processes, however, it is always possible for different potential meanings to emerge through the social and political processes of sensemaking. Narrative sensemaking thus attests to the pluralization of possible ways that sense can be made. Recognition of this has permitted researchers to study the different ways in which elaborated narratives and narrative fragments are or are not sufficiently consistent and continuous to maintain and objectify reality for participants. More than this, narratives 'are the style and substance of life' (Trible 1984, 1) through which 'identities, moral orders and relational patterns are constructed' (Cobb and Rifkin 1991, 71) out of the multitude of subject positions socially available.

Theorists with postmodern inclinations have gone so far as to say that stories should be regarded as ontologically prior to sensemaking, and that what people seek to make sense of are not events themselves, but accounts of them. Storytelling, then, has also been considered as a way that people reflexively make sense of organizations and organizational life and infuse their working lives with meaning. Accordingly, there is no ‘other reality’ to find under or behind narratives, because narratives form ‘the very texture of events’ (Skoldberg 1994, 233) and the means through which organizations are reflexively constructed. In addition, this suggests that, in appraising any given narrative, ‘there is no single *basically* basic story subsisting beneath it but, rather, an unlimited number of other narratives that can be *constructed in response* to it or *perceived as related* to it’ (Smith 1981, 217). The reflexivity of narrative sensemaking thus assumes that language ‘affects what we see and even the logic we use to structure our thought’ (Thatchenkery 2001, 115) such that narratives are structures through which events are made sense of rather than just being representations which convey meaning.

It has been claimed that ‘The ultimate lack of sense is when you cannot produce a narrative to go with a situation’ (Wallemacq and Sims 1998, 121). Generally understood as those processes of meaning production whereby people subjectively interpret phenomena and produce inter-subjective accounts (Weick 1995), processes of sensemaking are widely regarded as vital to our capacity to organize successfully. In particular, Orr’s (1990) study of photocopy repair technicians and Patriotta’s (2003) research on shop floor operatives both suggest that narratives are fundamental diagnostic tools that foster the spread of common understandings within communities of workers. This reflects a foundational assumption of the literature which suggests that humans are, either by nature (Brown 1986, 73) or as a result of socialization processes (Goody and Watt 1962–63; Krashen 1982), predisposed to think in storied form. Extending Burke’s (1968)

definition of man as a symbol-using animal, our species has been referred to as ‘*homo narrans*’ by a communication theorist (Fisher 1984, 6), ‘*homo fabulans* – the tellers and interpreters of narrative’ by a literary theorist (Currie 1998, 2), and as ‘essentially a story-telling animal’ by a moral philosopher (MacIntyre 1981, 201). Sociologists have defined a person ‘as a self-narrating organism’ (Ezzy 1998; Maines 1993, 23), the historian White (1981, 1) has described the ‘impulse to narrate’ as ‘natural’, and psychologists of various hues have characterized narrative as ‘a primary cognitive instrument’ (Mink 1978, 131; Polkinghorne 1988, 1) that underlies our thinking and emotional life (Rappaport 2000, 40), as an agent of both memory (Bower and Clark 1969) and meaning (Bruner 1990). In organization studies, Boland and Tenkasi (1995) have argued that narratives constitute the basic organizing principle of human cognition.

### *Communicating with Stories*

As a form of communication, narrative has been employed by examining the stories that people in organizations tell one another in order to describe past or anticipated events, relationships, successes, failures and emotions (Boje 1991b; Jones 1990). Inherent in this approach is the view that people use narratives to order their experience as they make sense of it. Rather than regarding communication as a form of transmission (Brown 1985), narrative recasts communication as a form of symbolic action (Weick and Browning 1986) which provides sequence, meaning and structure for those who live, create or invent stories (Browning 1992; Fisher 1984, 1985). This has enabled researchers to study communication as a means through which organizational reality is reflexively constructed through discursive action (Cooren 1999). Such action is mediated through stories, where stories are understood as symbolic forms of discourse that are a ‘framework for reality construction in the organization’ (Brown 1986, 80), that provide a common symbolic ground for organizational

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culture (Bormann 1994) and enable the creation, transformation and maintenance of that culture (Myrsiades 1987). Narratives are thus regarded as the means through which experience is reflexively reconstituted, made meaningful and made communicable. This is a *constitutive reflexivity* which sees accounts of the world as constituting the affairs that they speak of (Macbeth 2001).

Central to communication is the form of temporal sequencing that narratives perform (Browning 1992; Fisher 1984, 1985). This involves assembling and reassembling events as they are experienced into meaningfully temporalized narratives through which symbolic meaning and causal explanations can be inter-subjectively discussed, contested and (perhaps) agreed upon. The temporalized expression of the meaning of organizational events is achieved by imposing narrativity onto those events, no one narration is necessarily correct, true or accurate, but rather that there are 'as many narratives as there are actors' (Cooren 1999, 301; see also Boje 1995). A distinct feature of narrative approaches has been the study of how different forms of communicative narration can produce different organizational realities that exist simultaneously (Boje *et al.* 1999). Thus an organization can be regarded as a 'multidiscursive and precarious effect or product' (Law 1994, 250) – a 'storytelling organization' (Boje 1991a, 1995) that is enacted both through stories and through the genres in which they are told (Rhodes 2001a). This is in contrast to the more traditional approaches to organizational communication that regard organizations as closed systems with no contests over meaning (May 1994). Attention to plurality has enabled researchers to focus on how competing narratively embodied interpretations interact and how some stories become dominant and others marginalized (Aaltio-Marjosola 1994; Boje 1995).

Communications reflect the everyday dramas which people in organizations find important, and these can both support and oppose managerial narratives (Brown and McMillan 1991). Narrative theory has been used to argue

that communication is not about objective facts that exist independent of the person or groups through which they are transmitted. Rather, stories are subjective and inter-subjective accounts of experience. The value of studying stories is that they are 'inherent and powerful in organizational communication' (Smith and Keyton 2001, 174); they are 'the blood vessels through which changes pulsate in the heart of organizational life' (Boje 1991b, 8) and are 'vehicles of communication management' (Kaye 1995, 1). From this perspective, storytelling is an important aspect of managerial behaviour (Irwin and More 1993; Kaye 1995; Morgan and Dennehy 1997). Stories are a device through which managers work to inform employees about their preferred organizational cultures (Wilkins 1984) and provide managers with a form of social and inter-subjective interaction that reflects belief systems, role expectations, interpersonal norms and conditions for work behaviour (Hansen and Kahnweiler 1993; Irwin and More 1993). These stories are of value to researchers because they contain the subject-specific morals and beliefs of the people telling them (Hansen and Kahnweiler 1993; Martin 1982), serve as vehicles for community memory (Orr 1990), and socialize people into organizational norms (Brown 1985). Stories are, thus, important to the study of organizational communication because they are central in creating and maintaining corporate culture (Weick and Browning 1986), and legitimizing 'the power structure within a group or organization' (Brown 1986, 78–79). Such communication processes involve the co-production of organizational realities through particular instances of story performances (Boje 1991a). The active nature of such storytelling attests to the way that communication is subjectively enacted within given social and cultural meaning structures rather than being transmission based.

### *Narrative, Change and Learning*

The development of narrative approaches has also been extended into the study of organizational

change and learning. Such approaches draw heavily on the notion of narrative as a form of temporal order in that, like narrative, change is a time-based construct. While some theorists have argued that organizational changes are often constituted by changes in the narratives that participants author (e.g. Brown and Humphreys 2003), the major focus of this literature has been on how stories are a way of managing change in organizational culture. In particular, stories achieve this by encapsulating and entrenching organizational values (Meyer 1995), and by encouraging people in organizations to reformulate the meanings associated with organizational stories of both the past and the future (Feldman 1990; Kaye 1995; Kelly 1985; McConkie and Boss 1994; McConkie and Wayne 1986; Wilkins 1984). In this respect, stories are a 'powerful media for bringing about changes in people and in the culture of their workplace' (Kaye 1995, 1). These stories are said to relate the unstated norms that inform managerial rhetoric about organizational change (Feldman and Skoldberg 2002), as well as enabling the development of rich models of change and decision making that capture its complexity and detail (Stevenson and Greenberg 1998).

In terms of strategic change, stories have been theorized as diagnostic aids that people use to understand organizational norms and values, as management tools to involve people in the change process, and as means for helping people envision potential future realities from creative interpretations of the past (Barry and Elmes 1997; Boje 1991b; McConkie and Boss 1994). By linking past, present and future, such stories are said to be able to produce liminal conditions between current realities and future possibilities by constructing an 'as if' reality that helps people deal with ambiguity and change and thus helps create new and apparently legitimate structural conditions (Feldman 1990).

Narrative approaches have also contributed to understanding how particular meanings ascribed to organizational changes become dominant (Rhodes 2001a). Stories that circulate

culturally across organizations have been seen to provide accepted scripts through which to understand the dynamics of different organizational cultures (Martin *et al.* 1983). Stories are in this sense relational processes (Abma 2003) that allow collective action to be instigated (Gold 1997). During change efforts, these collective stories can act as a means of social control that prescribe or reinforce managerially preferred behaviours and values (McConkie and Boss 1986). This has led to suggestions that 'we need theories of change and consulting from a multiple narrative perspective' (Boje 1994, 457) and that these should be analysed *in situ* as embedded in organizational dialogues (Rhodes 2000b). Such dialogues stand in opposition to managerial monologues or 'grand stories' (Aaltio-Marjosola 1994) that enable hegemony to masquerade as consensus (Rhodes 2000b). To create dialogue, stories have also been employed as forms of organizational development intervention through the use of storytelling workshops which elicit 'counter stories' in order to challenge existing and outmoded ways of working (Abma 2000, 2003). Such interventions have also been studied in their function of introducing the voices of those who were hitherto unheard in organizational dialogues (Boje 1991b; Humphreys and Brown 2002a,b).

Another critical contribution of narrative research to the study of change has been an examination of how people in organizations construct their own narratives about change that can be inconsistent with those storylines centrally promulgated (Rhodes 2000a; Vaara 2002). This suggests that the meanings attached to change are not fixed or determined, but rather that people are reflexively engaged in developing their own interpretations of, and reactions to, change. The use of different narrative strategies has even been shown to enable what were previously regarded as failed change projects to be re-narrated as successful, and vice versa (Vaara 2002). It has also been demonstrated that stories can serve as means to provide legitimacy for organizational changes that might

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otherwise have been considered illegitimate, irrational or unnecessary (Rhodes 1997). In this sense, the meaning of change is reflexively constructed rather than being inherent in the material events that constitute the change. Further, stories can provide a means for managers to exonerate themselves from responsibility for failed change efforts (Brown and Jones 1998; Vaara 2002) and for founders of new organizations to justify the existence of them, and convince others to invest in them (O'Connor 2002).

The relationship between narrative and learning based approaches to organizational change is well established at both organizational and inter-subjective levels (Taylor *et al.* 2002; Tenkasi and Boland 1993; Vance 1991). Here learning is understood as occurring within the subjectively and inter-subjectively accepted structures of meaning embedded in repeated stories (Levitt and March 1988); stories which encapsulate the complexity of practice better than static or abstract models do. These stories can be regarded as stores of collective memory communicated and institutionalized through repetition (Orr 1990; Weick and Roberts 1993) that can be re-narrated to produce a 'diagnostic bricolage' (Orr 1990, 185) used to solve novel problems. In this way, stories are a means of learning that communities use collectively and contextually to change and improve practice (Brown and Duguid 1991; Krepes 1990). Stories can thus foster 'learning-in-organizing' when change emerges from dialogue between the many different possible ways of re-narrating the organization (Abma 2000). The circulation of such stories in organizations has also been shown to be a way of sensitizing managers to other ways of understanding their organizational realities, helping them develop new insights, stimulating critical thought and enabling problems to be analysed and solved in novel and more effective ways (Gold and Holman 2001; Gold *et al.* 2002; Mitroff and Kilmann 1975). For researchers, this has meant that stories can be analysed in terms of how they help people subjectively make sense of the strategic reasons for

change in relation to the meaning structures in organizations more generally (Dunford and Jones 2000).

### *The Power and Politics of Narrative*

Studying power from a narrative perspective enables it to be understood as a dynamic phenomenon, the form and enactment of which is subject to change over time. From a perspective which suggests that organizations are 'domains of legitimate authority' (Mumby and Stohl 1991, 315), narratives are regarded as a significant means by which organizations are discursively constructed and, importantly, reconstructed as regimes of 'truth' (e.g. Clegg 1989). The plasticity and interpretative flexibility of narratives also makes them particularly well suited for use in political games, where individuals and coalitions need often to present information differently to different audiences in order to secure acquiescence and enthusiasm (Brown 1985; Brown and Krepes 1993). Interestingly, analyses of political activity suggest that it is those narratives which are most coherent and earliest promulgated that tend to prevail, while those that are less coherent, or developed secondarily, are more likely to become marginalized or colonized by other accounts (Cobb 1993; Cobb and Rifkin 1991). On this reading, narratives are a potent political form that dramatize control and compel belief while shielding truth claims from testing and debate, and command attention and memory, often without exciting argumentative challenge (Witten 1993, 100). In this sense, power is understood as an attempt to stabilize meaning structures over time. However, in practice such stabilizations are best regarded as temporary. As Clegg (1989, 152) describes it, 'there is no reason to expect that representations will remain contextually and historically stable, but every reason to think that they will shift'.

The importance of shared narratives in creating and sustaining organizations as fractured and hierarchical locales in which individuals and groups are enmeshed in reciprocal but



asymmetric power relationships has been widely discussed (Boje 1995; Brown 1998; Czarniawska 1997). Narratives structure systems of presence and absence in organizations, insinuating particular sets of meanings into everyday practices, which are represented as authoritative, while excluding alternative conceptions (Hall 1985, 109; Westwood and Linstead 2001, 111). Following Foucault (1979), narratives are a type of discursive practice that functions as a disciplinary form, constituting organizational participants, actions and relationships in particular ways. The focus of study thus turns to how particular dominant narratives emerge from a multitude of possibilities, and the task of the researcher is to analyse which narratives dominate (and which do not), and how they came to do so. Often this means examining the disputation between more and less powerful narratives (Keleman and Hassard 2003). Further, although particular narratives might be more powerful than others, they are rarely monolithic, and narrative approaches have been used to theorize organizations as 'heteroglossic' (Bakhtin 1981) entities in which competing centripetal and centrifugal forces operate through multiple, often partially overlapping narratives, creating and sustaining polyphonic and plurivocal societies (Rhodes 2000b).

From a micro-perspective, narratives have also been recognized as important political tools. Narratives are, then, simultaneously 'the ground on which the struggle for power is waged, the object of strategies of domination, and the means by which the struggle is actually engaged and achieved' (Westwood and Linstead 2001, 10). Narrative researchers have been concerned with the way that narrative is used to reflexively reproduce power relations and the way that researchers too are embedded in those relationships (Boje *et al.* 1999). The issue that arises is 'not only the language of power but also the power of the language of power' (Clegg 1993, 40). Pertinent questions raised for researchers are: Who gets included in the research? Which stories are privileged? Who is silenced? These in turn raise

questions concerning how 'certain discursive positions embraced by researchers will seek consensus by reinforcing prevailing language; [and how] other positions will attempt to destabilize and challenge the status quo' (Keleman and Hassard 2003, 80). Most differences, however, will have their impact through being encoded in narratives that render such distinctions salient, memorable and meaningful (Brown 1998). Researchers' roles in this process are central to understanding their position in the power relations they are studying, as writers unavoidably intervene in the representations they create, and the stories they tell, where these acts of representation also suppress alternatives (Law 1994; Linstead 1993).

Scholars interested in power and organization have often linked narratives to notions of hegemony and legitimacy as they relate to subjectivity. Drawing on Gramsci (1971), hegemony is generally understood to refer to 'the successful mobilization and reproduction of the active consent of dominated groups' (Clegg 1989, 160). Hegemonic domination is never completely fixed or permanent but, rather, always subject to renegotiation, a constant work-in-progress. Nor is it ever complete, for 'no hegemonic logic can account for the totality of the social and constitute its centre' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 142). The interplay of different hegemonic claims is, however, discernible through an analysis of the shared narratives of different hegemonic groups (Humphreys and Brown 2002a,b) which imprison those subject to them by denying contradictions, naturalizing inequalities and re-presenting minority interests as universal, fixed and immutable (Clair 1993; Mumby 1987). It is through such processes that subjectivity, as it is narratively embodied, is deeply connected to 'complex socio-cultural, behavioural and emotional disciplinary regimes' (Iedema 2003, 32). Narrative approaches enable subjectivity to be understood as being, at least in part, a product of sociocultural narratives that seek to define particular ways of being (Chappell *et al.* 2003).

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### *Identifying with Narratives*

It has been variously suggested that the identities of individuals are constituted through processes of narration (Carr 1986, 5), that identities exist only as narratives (Currie 1998, 17), and that life is an enacted narrative (MacIntyre 1981) which is plotted over time (Chappell *et al.* 2003). These narratives are generally recognized to be appropriated from the grand narratives of the communities and cultures to which an individual belongs (Rappaport 2000, 6), and to be 'punctuated by gaps and uncertainties' (Wiener and Rosenwald 1993, 30) while also exhibiting a reasonable degree of integration and coherence over time (Grotevant 1993, 123). Indeed, the relationship between temporalization and identity has been the subject of intense debates in phenomenological approaches to philosophy. Within such debates is a contest over whether identity is best regarded as that aspect of a person that is stable and enduring over time, or whether identity is more malleable within temporal structures. In organizational research, the most common approach has been to regard identity as a form of self-narrative (Gergen and Gergen 1988), which can then be used to explain how workers are 'enjoined to incorporate the new managerial discourses into [their] ... self-identity' (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 622).

Perhaps the greatest value that narrative has brought to the study of identity rests in a consideration of the many possible identities that organizational members can adopt and the ways in which particular identities strive for dominance. Importantly, there is a consensual acknowledgement that solitary narrators do not have *carte blanche*, but are constrained in the stories they tell about themselves, not least by the cultural resources at their disposal and the expectations of others (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992, 9). Less sanguine theorists tend to describe narrative identities as power effects, arguing that '[w]e come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives

rarely of our own making' (Somers 1994, 606). Within organization studies, a considerable volume of work has been conducted which supports the view that narratives are '[a] highly effective way of analyzing how identities are continuously constructed' (Gabriel 1999, 196). In particular, critical theorists have argued that narratives provide an insightful means of analysing subjectively construed identities as complex outcomes of processes of subjugation and resistance that are contingent and perpetually shifting (Jermier *et al.* 1994; Rose 1989). Together, these approaches coalesce around the idea that the identity of a person is not fixed, but rather arises from the many possible cultural forms of identification available.

Narratological approaches to understanding identity offer especially interesting means of exploring the phenomenon of identification in terms of how individuals' beliefs about their organizations become self-reflexively defined (Pratt 1998, 172). Albert (1998, 12), for example, has argued that identification processes 'are best described in narrative and qualitative terms ... and are therefore linked to and legitimated by studies of narrative and by the continuing development of qualitative approaches'.

Other scholars have contended that stories function to promote identification (Brown 1985), that participants express understanding and commitment to organizations through stories, and that members' degree of familiarity with dominant organizational stories may indicate their level of adaptation to the organization (Brown 1982; McWhinney 1984). It is by means of identification narratives that people consciously and unconsciously elaborate and re-elaborate their relationship with the organizations to which they belong, centring themselves (Bowles 1989) as ambivalent, detached or committed (Elsbach 1999). The central contention here is that, in any given instance, the nature of the integration (Pratt 1998) or fusion (Ashforth 1998, 269) of the individual self and the organization implied by an identification relationship can valuably be researched through the self-narratives that a person authors.

Narrative has been implicated not just in conceptions of individual identity, but the identity of groups (including those based on ethnicity and gender), organizations, communities, and even entire nations (Currie 1998, 2). The theoretical basis for understanding collective identities as, and through, the narratives that they author has been sketched by Carr (1986, 128) who argues that narration 'is what constitutes the community' in the sense that narratives establish and maintain connections between people who may or may not know each other personally. Empirical explorations of collective identity narratives have been conducted by community psychologists, who have asserted that 'Community narratives are central to the identity of the community' (Stuber 2000, 509), and that 'A community cannot be a community without a shared narrative' (Rappaport 2000, 6). Similarly, organizational scientists have described narratives as expressive of organizational distinctiveness (Clark 1970, 1972), vehicles for uniqueness claims (Martin *et al.* 1983), and as means for 'collective centering' (Boyce 1996). Empirical research suggests that frequently told tales help to establish and maintain organizational identity (McWhinney and Battista 1988, 46), that organizations 'exist to tell their collective stories' (Boje 1995, 1000), and that '[o]rganizations need a coherent narrative just as [individual] humans do' (Czarniawska 1997, 24). It is through the investigation and analysis of the narratives that participants author about their groups, departments and organizations that we may come to a sophisticated understanding of working lives (Humphreys and Brown 2002a,b; Terkel 1972).

### Discussion and Conclusion

So far we have provided a literature review of five main areas of organization research where narrative-based approaches have been applied, and assessed the theoretical value that they have added. In this section, we develop our story further by considering these studies collectively in terms of the main contributions,

implications and limitations of narrative research. We argue that, while narrative has developed as a sophisticated research methodology, its exclusion from, and opposition to, a narrowly defined scientific paradigm in organization theory imposes limitations on its further development, and on the development of organization theory itself. Narrative methodologies emphasize aspects of organization and organization theory, such as temporality, plurality, reflexivity and subjectivity, that are underplayed by traditional approaches. Further, we suggest that science and stories are both important in organization research, and that attention to one need not necessarily preclude understanding of the other.

### *The Contribution of Narrative Research*

One key contribution of narrative research is the attention it focuses on temporal issues in organizations. Narrative involves the unfolding of a story of events and experiences over time. Emplotment is a key feature of narrative, and 'plot requires a pre-understanding of time and temporal structures' (Boje 2001, 113) so, by invoking narrative, one is concomitantly employing time as a central organizing concept. In this sense, narrative locates observations in time rather than regarding those observations as 'a logically formulated set of principles valid at all times' (Czarniawska 1997, 174). Thus, rather than viewing organizations as static, homogeneous and consistent entities, narrative approaches demonstrate the processual characteristics of organizations and can render both the paradoxes and complex causal relationships inherent in organizational change open to analysis.

Narrative research also has value because it permits consideration of the different possible meanings of organizational action (Boje 1995; Rhodes 2001a). This has enabled research to focus not only on the object of study (what is narrated) as a singular reality, but on the plurality of different possible stories and storytellers. This feature implies an appreciation that any given narrative structuring is not

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necessarily implicit in what is being studied, but rather that narrative is a form of ordering that is imposed on what is being studied in order to make sense of organizational phenomena. By implication, it is recognized that there is more than one way to tell a story and that 'multiple voicing' (Gergen and Gergen 2000) is always possible. Such pluralization draws attention to a 'crisis of validity' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994) such that narrative can generate different and potentially competing stories which highlight that knowledge about organizations is actively constructed rather than a stable entity to be explicated.

Recognizing the multiple ways that stories can be told encourages a view of organizations as actively constructed through discursive activity. By implication, both researchers and people in organizations are actively involved in the narrative reconstitution of organizations, and the choices made about what is included and excluded in the stories that are told and re-told by researchers. When research is re-cast as a process of telling stories about stories, the means by which those stories are created is an important area for analysis and methodological reflection. This draws attention to the reflexivity inherent in the research enterprise – an issue that has been said to be a primary innovation in recent developments in qualitative methodologies more generally (Gergen and Gergen 2000).

Narrative theorizing represents a move away from the 'aperspectival sense of objectivity with the realist ontology that typifies much of organization science' (McKinley 2003, 142). Instead, narrative has been used to study organizations in relation to the subjective interactions that produce narrated meanings (including those of the researcher), as well as a problematization of the very definition of what we mean by a 'subject' *qua* person. This is an epistemological position that the 'knower and respondent cocreate understandings' (Denzin and Lincoln 2003, 35), including understandings of who they are and their relation to others. Thus, narratives are means through which organizations are brought to

life in the different ways that people can construct meaning and identity from organizational events and experiences. The organization is not regarded as an object of study, but seen rather to be subjectively and inter-subjectively constructed through the stories told by both researchers and organizational stakeholders.

Narrative research across the social sciences collectively illustrates and elaborates a unique perspective on the human condition in general and organizational life in particular. By listening to, documenting, analysing and reporting the different stories that people tell about their organizations, narrative researchers have sought to bring the subjective experience of people in organizations within the focus of research (Gabriel 1998). This concern with subjectivity and inter-subjectivity has meant that many narrative researchers have become increasingly sensitive to organizations as sites of plural and contested meaning; including a reflexive sensitivity to the researcher's own role as a teller of stories about organizations (Rhodes 2001a). From such a perspective, organizations are understood not as singular and objective, but rather as resulting from different perspectives and accounts where it is possible that what we call an 'organization' can mean different things to different people (Thatchenkery 1992; Walter-Busch 1995). This leads to the study of organizations as socially constructed verbal systems where each person who is part of the organization has a voice, but where some voices are louder, more articulate and more powerful than others (Hazen 1993).

The researcher's attention is thus not only placed on the individual accounts of people in organizations, but also on the organization as a network of interrelated narrative interpretations (Boje 1995; Phillips and Brown 1993) formed from a 'pluralistic construction of a multiplicity of stories, storytellers and story performance' (Boje 1995, 1000). This enables researchers to examine and compare narratives as different 'takes' on an organization and to study the different ways of telling stories about what is ostensibly the same

organization or the same incident (Gabriel 1995; Law 1994; Rhodes 2000a, 2001a). Researchers using narrative approaches both need to be aware of the different stories told in organizations and to seek new ways of representing them that do not subsume the multiplicity of stories into a single authoritative account (Aaltio-Marjosola 1994; Rhodes 2001a; Salzer-Morling 1998). Further, it alerts us to the requirement for reflexivity in research such that researchers realize that they too are telling stories, and selecting which stories are told (Hatch 1996; Rhodes 2001a).

### *Implications for Research: Stories and Science*

Narrative methods have contributed broadly to research in organization theory – the implications of which are significant not only to methods and processes, but to the whole conceptualization of the research enterprise. The idea that narrative constitutes a kind of methodology (or set of methodologies) has played an important part in questioning conventional scientific approaches that define narratives and stories in opposition to fact and in subordination to theory and science (Czarniawska-Joerges 1995; Daft 1983; Gabriel 1998; Jacobson and Jacques 1997; Mitroff and Kilmann 1976). Researchers who use narrative methods have argued that stories and facts are not mutually exclusive categories (Gabriel 1991) and that narrative can provide new sources of empirical material beyond those available to ‘normal science’ (Gabriel 1998; Hummel 1991; Mitroff and Kilmann 1976, 1978; Phillips 1995), more effective means of representing and communicating research (Daft 1983; Dyer and Wilkins 1991; Rhodes 2001a; Watson, 2000), and sharper analytical tools for research (Czarniawska 1997; Hatch 1996; Pentland 1999; Phillips 1995).<sup>1</sup> This has marked an important departure from positivistic research methodologies which maintain that ‘science should keep to facts and logic, leaving metaphors and stories to literature, this being a sediment of premodern times and oral societies’

(Czarniawska 1998, 7). Narratological methodologies have not only questioned seriously such a marginalization of narrative, but have also achieved a partial reunification such that organizational knowledge might develop from a broader epistemological ambit. Narrative is not just based on a negative critique of other methodologies, it also demonstrates real alternative with substantive analytical benefits.

It has been suggested that the scientific foundations of management research have created conditions for ‘the researcher to be neutral, detached or not engaged in the phenomena under study, free from context, and self referencing ... [which] ... leads one on the path of disengagement from and abstraction of the variety of management phenomena under study’ (Mackenzie *et al.* 2002, 302). Such forms of management research are pre-occupied with finding theories ‘about how every organization has to work, how every employee is motivated, how all top teams work together or don’t’ (Nord 2004, 130). Contra such perspectives on science, an achievement of narrative research has been a reconsideration of positions with respect to research methodology which are increasingly regarded as being idealistic in their ethos and spurious in their claims (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). As Wicks and Freeman (1998) have argued, it is a mistake to suggest that science provides an ‘anarrative’ and factual way of looking at the world that goes beyond the subjectivity of storytelling. Further, claims to do so constitute a political means through which to posit a transcendent narrative that operates outside the contested and subjective meanings that are ascribed to work in both theory and practice. Being explicit about narrative denies claims to transcendence and enables the localities of practice to be examined in terms of their complexity, contradictions and multivocality. It is in these ways that narrative offers the possibility of retreating from abstraction in a way that engages with the experiences of work, management and organizing.

It is the ability to engage reflexively with the lived experience of work that is a key

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methodological advantage of narrative approaches. As Zald (1996) argues 'narrative and rhetorical techniques ... can be used to examine how people in organizations represent and construct their lives' (p. 254). Such 'everyday' understandings of work and management, however, often go unaccounted for in scholarship. Further, when they are considered, they are taken as something to be analysed and not something that might have epistemic value. Pearce (2004) has suggested that management scholars tend to inhabit two parallel intellectual worlds – the world of scholarship and the world of 'folk wisdom'. The former involves thoughtful intellectual work and careful methodological application, while the latter emerges from experience and culture. For Pearce, it is the world of folk wisdom that is underappreciated and relatively unexamined in management research. As he suggests, a core reason for this is the culture of scholarship that finds such folk wisdom to be inferior or irrelevant because of its lack of scholarly legitimacy. Nevertheless, he suggests that folk wisdom has 'more value than we are willing to admit' (Pearce 2004, 176). Our argument is that narrative methods have the potential to dissolve the duality between traditional scholarship and subjective experience in a way that is methodologically sophisticated and theoretically justified. The value of this is particularly relevant at a time when 'the dominant positivist language game of organizational analysis no longer offers robust explanations for the increasingly complex and elusive structures and processes of organizational phenomena' (Kelemen and Hassard 2003, 79). Further, as Weick (1995, 127) has argued 'most models of organization are based on argumentation rather than narration yet most organizational realities are based on narration'. If these realities are to be a constitutive part of organizational research, a sophisticated theoretical and methodological understanding of narrative is critical.

Methodologically, narrative provides a means of engaging with the experience of organizing – it answers the calls for 'increased attention

to local knowledge' (Kilduff and Mehra 1997, 470) and practice driven theory (Schatzki *et al.* 2000). As a result, the subjective realities of organizational life might be addressed in temporalized context in lieu of scientific abstraction, yet without giving up on theoretical reflection and sophistication. Narrative research is, by and large, an empirical tradition that examines how experience is reflexively constructed into stories that may or may not be commensurate. It provides a methodological position through which to engage not with a presumed neutral 'real' world, but with the complex nuances of the 'lived' world.

### *An Unfinished Story*

At the outset of this paper, we stated that our goal was to tell a story about narrative research. In approaching this task, we explored the development and maturation of the use of narrative to inform theory and methodology in terms of the dramatic tension between science and stories. This tension has characterized the story of narrative from the beginning. The earliest studies of narratives in the 1970s had to be defended against claims that it was improper to pay attention to stories in the social sciences (Mitroff and Kilmann 1976). Stories were regarded as being of relatively little value, because they did not conform to popular social scientific stereotypes of 'what constituted theory' (Eisenhardt 1991). Indeed, to this day it is palpable that organization studies privileges argumentation (Weick 1995) and abstraction (Pearce 2004) over engagements with the meaning of experience; the latter being what narrative approaches are best equipped to address. Narrative approaches recognize that 'all behavior is historical' and that such behaviour 'takes place over time and in particular contexts' (Zald 1996, 256). This contrasts to 'most of our mainstream journal articles [which] are written as if they apply to some disembodied abstract realm ... as if the paper dealt with some timeless entity' (p. 256).

It must be noted that the focus on narrative in relation to science, which we have performed

in our discussion, is important because it is within this relation that the story of narrative research has developed in organization studies. The legacy of positivism in this field has meant that the emergence of narrative, as a new approach, has had to enter a field characterized by the historical dominance of a positivistic or quasi-positivistic scientific rationality. In this process, narrative has often been merely dismissed. The story we have told is intended as a rebuttal of such a position.

However, not all critiques of narrative emerge from the organizational studies strongholds of (quasi) positivism. Critiques of narrative and discourse based knowledge have also emerged in relation to realist ontologies. Habermas (1992), for example, issues a stern warning about the consequences of 'turning science and philosophy into literature' (p. 226). In response to what he sees as poststructuralism's concerted effort to blur, or even obliterate, genre boundaries, Habermas maintains that the traditional demarcation between science and narrative/literature is still important. He argues that science needs still to rest on some idea of validity instead of taking a discursive approach where 'all validity claims becomes immanent to particular discourses' (p. 209). His argument rests on the principle that science genres differ from literary genres because 'what is said in the text [ ... refers to ... ] something in the world' (p. 224). Like ourselves, Habermas is clearly aware that many a productive scientist has had the ability to tell a good story, but he adds that this is not sufficient for science. Scientific texts, for Habermas, should always be focused on making validity claims with respect to the goings on in the world and, concomitantly, that the difference between genres should not be liquidated.

The implication of Habermas' argument for our own discussion comes down to a consideration of how we might understand the nature of that which we investigate. The suggestion is that discursive based knowledge systems fail to account for the 'reality' of the world. Most generally, this rests on a presupposition

that realism is necessary for any 'sane' science. As Searle (1995) describes it, this realism is about defending 'the idea that there is a real world independent of our thought and talk, and [ ... ] defending the correspondence theory of truth, the idea that our true statements are typically made true by how things are in the real world that exists independently of the statements' (p. xiii). From the point of view of social science, realism also postulates that 'it is possible to achieve knowledge about this reality' (Brante 2001, 168)

The emergence of critical realism in the philosophy of science (Bhaskar 1978, 1989) and its take up in organization studies (see Reed 2000, 2004) are another means through which realism has been defended and the collapse of knowledge into language disputed. Critical realism offers a critique of positivism that is quite different from that of the discursive/narrative mode that we have been discussing here. Indeed, Reed (2000) positions critical realism directly against discursive approaches based on social constructivism. For him, the distinction between reality and knowledge is crucial, and 'the material and social worlds of which we are constituent [ ... ] cannot be treated as if they are ultimately dependent on [ ... ] consciousness or language' (Reed 2004, 415). Although we are not going to resolve disputes between discursive/narrative constructivism and realism here (see Tsoukas 2000), the point we make is that narrative approaches are not only characterized by internal diversity but are also contested from various perspectives.

In a traditional sense, stories end when the key tension that informs them comes to a climax and is resolved. In the case of our story, no such resolution appears imminent. If anything, what we should like to achieve with this paper is the maintenance of the tension. As Kearney (2002) has argued, 'truth is not the sole prerogative of the so-called exact sciences. There is also a truth, with its corresponding understanding, that we may properly call "narrative". We need both' (p. 148). While the history of organization studies has

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been dominated by an attempt to emulate the exact sciences, the implication of Kearney's argument is that such hegemonic moves are misguided; hubristic even. As we have seen, narrative can provide a different, and valuable, form of knowledge that enables researchers to engage with the lived realities of organizational life – the 'truth' that people at work live through every day. This is not a knowledge that aspires to certainty and control but rather emerges from a reflection on the messy realities of organizational practice (Czarniawska 2003). It is this embodied and lived knowledge that narrative methods enable researchers to access and engage with while embracing scholarly values.

The issue for organization theory is that, while the value and productivity of narrative knowledge has been demonstrated time and time again, this has been accomplished despite the dominance of positivistic (natural scientific) schema. If we who study organizations are to take the lives of others seriously and sympathetically – as a means to understand rather than to control, to accept ambiguity rather than demand certainty, and to engage with lived experience rather than to abstract from it – then the turn to narrative needs to be continued. It is our hope that this paper will contribute to broadening the space for such knowledge.

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### Note

1 Although not our main focus, it is worth noting that, as well as using narrative as a methodology to inform the study of organizations, researchers have also studied cultural narratives about organizations. This has included research into how organizations are represented in literary novels (Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux 1994),

popular culture (Hassard and Holliday 1998), television (Rhodes 2001b, 2002) and science fiction (Smith *et al.* 2001).

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