On becoming irrelevant: An analysis of charity workers' untold epic stories

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Keywords	Abstract
	While the nature, character and function of stories are variously theorized in organizational storytelling literature, little research has tried to unpack how organizational narrative domain may transform over time. Attending to the contextual transformation of organizational story space can reveal how popular stories at one epoch could be reformulated, ignored, or forgotten all together during another epoch. Drawing on ethnographic data of a children's charity in UK, which experienced a stage of rapid professionalization, specialization, and bureaucratization, I examine the influence of this restructuring initiative on the organizational narrative domain. It was shown that the professionalization of the charity starved the old stories of the oxygen of relevance. The memories of the old pioneers, from the days of stress and violence, became less welcome as the organization turned increasingly managerial in character. The notion of 'irrelevancy' is further developed drawing on the work of Maurice Halbwachs, and its implications are elaborated building on storytelling research.

Introduction

"We all love stories: Five for silver, six for gold, seven for a story that has never been told." Gabriel (1991a) starts his article with this traditional nursery rhyme, reflecting on the value and power of stories. The quote reflects an underlying assumption behind existing literature on organizational storytelling, that is, stories have an inherent value which make them interesting and sought after by others. This literature often adopts a narrow definition of 'story' referring to specific types of discourse that draw on particular poetic and literary genres, follow certain theatrical styles and are often delivered with entertainment and spectacle in mind (Gabriel 2000, p. 9–10). It is argued that such stories comprise a primary medium through which members make sense of, account for, enact and affect the organizations they work for (Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2009). Having attributed such value to stories, organization scholars have embarked on the task of explaining why stories appear as they do (Driver, 2009; Freud, 1955; Yiannis Gabriel, 1991b, , 1991c; Y. Gabriel,

Hirschhorn, & Allcorn, 1999; Kostera, 2008)- and why such stories are circulated in an organization (Brown & Humphreys, 2003; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Strangleman, 1999; Wilkins, 1983; Ybema, 2010). This assumption about the undisputable value of stories has contributed to the development of most of our knowledge today about organizational stories. Yet it obscures the fact that many of these stories elicited in an interview setting may have lost their original significance in the organizational narrative domain. Indeed, the stories told to researchers may not be recounted outside the interview setting (Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2009), for various reasons, ranging from fear (Morrison & Milliken, 2000) to lack of storytelling skills (Yiannis Gabriel, 2000).

One reason for a lack of attention to the transformation and career of elicited stories within its organizational context could be the tremendous difficulty of collecting stories in the specific sense of the word, i.e. stories with a plot and particular beginning and ending (D.M. Boje, 2008; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998; Yiannis Gabriel, 2000). Even an experienced story researcher, such as Gabriel (2000), reports that many of his participants failed to narrate a single story that would be highly rated by folklorists. This could mean that researchers may have over-emphasized the pervasiveness of the few stories that they managed to collect. An alternative explanation is that as this literature mostly relied on a single source of data (usually interviews), researchers were not able to investigate the usage of those stories in everyday work conversation (Ciuk & Kostera, 2010; With a few notable exceptions of Yiannis Gabriel, 1991c; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Whatever the reasons may be, only a few researchers tried to explore what happens to elicited stories outside the interview setting, whether they are recounted in the organization or whether these stories are, or have been accepted and believed at all by others (Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2009).

An alternative approach advocated by Boje (2008), focused on capturing 'living stories' or emergent stories in dialogues around a certain organizational issue (e.g. David M. Boje, 1995; David M. Boje & Rosile, 2003; e.g. David M. Boje, Rosile, Durant, & Luhman, 2004; Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2009). This approach mostly elicited how organizational participants use terse narrative, or fragmented antenarratives in daily conversation to make sense of various situations, and to reconstruct their identity and character (e.g. David M. Boje, 1995; David M. Boje & Rosile, 2003; e.g. David M. Boje, Rosile, Durant, & Luhman, 2004; Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2009). This literature shed light on storytelling as a multi authored, polyphonic and polysemous process, yet it rarely succeed in capturing stories with an underlying plot and some sort of distinguishable beginning and end. Gabriel (2000) refuted such antenarrative or proto-stories as stories with 'anaemic quality' (Ibid. 20). Besides this disagreement over the definition of 'proper story' (David M. Boje, Rosile, & Gardner, 2004), the living story (or antenarrative) approach is restricted to actors' storytelling in one isolated situation, and thus often overlooks the links between one story and another. While limiting the analysis to a particular organizational setting has been useful in discussing the function of a particular storyline or terse-telling, this limited scope means that the relevance of stories to the broader organizational context is often ignored.

More broadly, it could be argued that neither of these approaches (eliciting stories and living stories) has taken much account of changes in organizational stories and narrative domain over time. In particular, little attempt was made to understand how certain 'stories' (in the specific sense of the word) remain untold or disappear from organizational narrative domain. The current study tries to address this gap by discussing stories collected during an ethnographic study, combining both approaches- listening to storytellers' coherent stories told to the researcher in the interview setting and recording living stories as they emerged in the field. I have taken a more critical stance on the registration of stories collected from interviews as 'organizational lore', and thus have scrutinized whether collected stories are reproduced in organizations, by whom, and for which purpose (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In an ethnographic study conducted over a period of six months, I explored the "story space" (David M. Boje, Rosile, & Gardner, 2004) of a charity organization in UK. In contrast with previous research, the focus of this article is to understand why certain stories have not been circulated among employees. In particular, I draw on stories that have a significant meaning for a group of employees, and demonstrate that, along with the changes in organizational activity (business model) and workforce demography, these stories lost their relevance and were subsequently widely forgotten at the time the study was conducted.

My arguments are contained in six main sections. First, I discuss current approaches in narrative research, and draw attention to the lack of contextual grounding in most research in this field. Second, I outline the methodology and depict the site of research of the reader. Third, a number of stories elicited in the interview setting are presented and analyzed using conventional structural (plot) analysis. Fourth, I show that the elicited stories did not become part of any organizational lore because old-hand members of staff aborted sharing their 'epic' stories with others. Fifth, I investigate various reasons which may explain old-hand staff member's self-censuring and establish that the irrelevancy of the old

epic stories is a major contributing factor. Finally, the concept of irrelevancy is further unpacked drawing on storytelling research, and Halbwachs' work on collective memory.

Narrative Research in Organizations

The study of narrative and storytelling has a long tradition in organizational theory (David M. Boje, 1991; Boyce, 1996; Brown, 2005; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998; Yiannis Gabriel, 1991c; Kostera, 2008). The first surge of interest in organizational narrative was inspired by the cultural turn in organization studies (Dandridge, Mitroff, & Joyce, 1980; Pettigrew, 1979). These scholars tried to map out various narrative forms, such as stories, myth, legends and jokes in the domain of organization, and their generic functions; both manifest and latent (Mitroff & Kilmann, 1976; Pondy, 1983; Smircich, 1983; Trice & Beyer, 1984). These studies were aiming to provide a general theory of narrative in Organizations, rather than attending to particularities of a specific organizational narrative. Scholars from a functionalist paradigm emphasize the use of narrative forms for the maintenance of social order (Rappaport, 1971; Wilkins, 1983). Scholars from the interpretive paradigm instead discuss how narratives provide a means through which both individual and collective meanings are expressed (Berg, 1985; Clark, 1972; Mahler, 1988; Smircich, 1983). For instance, in one of the most cited research of this kind, Clark (1972) studied "organizational saga" as claims made by charismatic leaders about their unique accomplishments. Mitroff and Kilmann (1975, p.18) suggest that narratives such as "epic myths" capture the unique quality of an organization.

This literature, however, is criticized for romanticizing organizational narratives by claiming that every organization has its own static and durable narrative (Boyce, 1996; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983) which represents the organization's unique culture (see Martin, Feldman et al. 1983 for a critical account). Besides claims about the uniqueness and solidity of organizational narrative, this research is mostly concerned with founding narratives (what became famous as Bill and Dave stories after the founders of Hewlett-Packard), and founders' role in creating and changing organizational culture (Clark, 1972; Pettigrew, 1979; Schein, 1983). This focus on managerial (and entrepreneurial) narrative is criticized by many critical scholars who draw attention to other voices in organizations (David M. Boje, 1995; Martin, 1992). Gabriel (1991), for instance, criticizes this research for capturing corporate fantasies rather than the realities of the organization. He claims such stories often have a more distinctive life in academic circles than in the Organizations in which such stories were once narrated. A number of scholarly studies on organizational narrative adopt a more critical agenda in response to these critiques (David M. Boje, 1995; Brown, 1998b; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998; Yiannis Gabriel, 2000; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Sims, 2003).

The most widespread of these approaches has been using narrative as a research methodology (David M. Boje, 2001; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998). Czarniawska (1998) coins the term "organizing as narration" to label this research, which mostly applies the interpretive devices of literary theory to the linguistically structured data of interpretive research (e.g. Corvellec, 1997; O'Connor, 2000). This research addresses various organizational phenomena, such as authority (Brown, 2004), leadership (Fleming, 2001), legitimacy (Brown, 1998a), change (Rhodes, 1996), and organizational complexity (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001) as narrative processes. They show that story-telling can serve several purposes, such as justifying failures, claiming successes, facilitating sensemaking (Wilkins, 1983), managing and disseminating knowledge (Snowden, 2002), and facilitating change (Strangleman, 1999; Ybema, 2010). Rhodes (1997), for instance, demonstrates how stories can serve as a means to provide legitimacy for organizational changes that might otherwise have been considered illegitimate, irrational or unnecessary. Brown and Humphreys (2003) study how organizational changes are often constituted by changes in the narratives that participants author. Rhodes (2001) discusses how a specific meaning ascribed to organizational changes becomes dominant through narrative processes.

In contrast to the positivist research where stories were taken for their ostensible meaning, for instance, to glorify or celebrate the prevailing corporate culture (e.g. Deal & Kennedy, 1982), this critical scholarship suggested that stories should not be seen as simple descriptions of events, as they often convey hidden meanings and messages (Yiannis Gabriel, 1991a, , 1991b)(Gabriel 1991b, 2000). Scholars thus applied various techniques to unravel these meanings drawing on psychoanalytic theory (Driver, 2009; Freud, 1955; Yiannis Gabriel, 1991b; Y. Gabriel, Hirschhorn, & Allcorn, 1999), morphological analysis (Propp, 1968) or cultural metaphors (Kostera, 2008). One common technique used by these scholars it to analyze stories based on their plots and characters in the story. This approach is used for analyzing both elicited stories and stories in situ (e.g. Gabriel 2000, Boje 2001, Whittle et al. 2009). Plot is defined as the sequence of events or incidents of which the story is composed (David M. Boje, 2001). Stories are often classified according to the

underlying plot in action which, to name the most popular ones, can be epic, tragic, comedic and romantic (Gabriel 2000). Plot analysis is, however, more than a simple classification of stories. Emplotment is shown to grasp together selected events, characters, and actions into a plot line which gives a deeper meaning to the story (Boje 2001). Moreover, stories with different plotlines often perform varying roles in organizations. Gabriel (1991), for instance, shows that comic stories could work as a mechanism to cope with anxiety. Whittle et al. (2009) suggests 'cock-up' stories can be used as a face-saving strategy to maintain one's social position.

This paper benefits from this structural analysis techniques (such as plot analysis); however, it departs from conventional story analysis techniques, by emphasizing the constitutional role of context in giving meaning to stories. By 'context', I mean, non-discursive but contextually-present materials, such as tacit assumptions and knowledge that shape meanings. This emphasis on the contextual grounding of narrative analysis is inspired by Deetz (2003) and Hansen (2006) who suggest researchers should treat the context of construction as "constitutive" as text in meaning making. Context, they argue, is something separate from text and provides additional meaning to the text. Such an emphasis on the context of construction is in contrast to the main stream narrative research which focuses solely on text as the data source (Fairclough, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987), assuming that there is nothing 'outside the text' (Martin & Frost, 2011). Even when this literature takes 'context' into account, narrative researchers often favor textual data over contextual or ethnographic data (Czarniawska 1998), and context is assumed to have only a moderating role in aiding textual interpretation (Hansen 2006).

To address this problem, Hansen (2006) calls for new methods of working with data which entail "a distinct conceptualization of text/context" (Ibid. 1051) and take into account not only themes and assumptions underlying the discourse, but "cultural and contextual understandings that shape discursive actions" (Ibid. 1063). This gives text a margin of play and opens up some room for new plausible interpretations drawing on the context (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). In an attempt to provide an example of such an approach, Hansen (2006) developed a method which he calls 'ethnonarrative', combining narrative methods and ethnography. Similar to Boje (2008) and Samra-Fredericks (2003), he uses talk in 'naturally occurring interactions' to grasp the immediate context of production and interpretation of discourse (Hansen 2006, p.1064). Yet, he goes beyond conventional textual analysis of 'discourse-in-use' featured in conversation analysis (Sacks & Jefferson, 1995) or discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), emphasizing the need for an (ethnographic) awareness of implicit assumptions that guide both the production and interpretation of discourse. Observing discourse as it happens combined with a cultural awareness, Hansen (2006) suggests, could give insight about the discursive battles that take place during the construction of a text, and free researchers from a narrow focus on the dominant narrative which survived the battle.

The concurrent application of narrative analysis, which is somewhat abstract (that is "non-situated") , with the "material groundedness" of ethnography has the potential to move the field beyond the traditional "constructivist domination" and "discursive isolationism" (N. Phillips & Oswick, 2012, p. 468). Hansen's approach is, however, restricted to the study of discourse-in-use which has its own limitations. These limitations are inherent in the associated data collection strategies of discourse analysis. Firstly, researchers should be able (and be permitted) to record extensive conversations often with the support of a tape recorder. This however risks intimidating or unnerving potential storytellers. The presence of a tape recorder may seriously constrain participants from "telling tales that may not be factually backed up or that may compromise them with colleagues, subordinates, and superiors" (Gabriel 2000, p.40). Moreover, studying narrative in situ may not capture the narrative which is untold in the public space of the organization or simply is forgotten. Sharing similar concern with Boje (2008) and Hansen (2006) for understanding the narrative domain as a negotiated and contested space, I propose a different approach for empirically demonstrating what has been marginalized or excluded from organizational narrative domain. I developed a methodology combining eliciting stories through interviews and ethnographic study, while questioning how texts are created, whom they are created by, and the media through which they are passed (C. F. Phillips & Brown, 1993). I particularly draw attention to elicited stories which were not retold outside the interview context, and tried to understand what made such stories disappear from organization narrative domain. In the next section, I discuss the methodology and the case study in details.

Method

The research presented here originated in an ethnographic study conducted for a bigger project aiming to study organizational storytelling as an "institutional memory system of the organization" which circulates fragments of information, and recreates the past according to present (David M. Boje, 2001, p. 106; Halbwachs, 1992/1925). The

ephemeral quality of storytelling required an intensive immersion and cognitively intensive engagement in the field (Kostera & Postula, 2011; Rosen, 2000). The research was conducted at Cheningham Youth Centre (CYC), a children's charity in the UK, over a period of one year by collecting a mix of ethnographic data, in-depth semi-structured interviews and archival data. The researcher worked at the charity's Drop-in Centre as a volunteer for two days a week (over approximately a period of five months), followed by a full time participant observation for a month. During this time, 28 meetings were recorded (each approximately one hour long), 30 semi-structured interviews (on average 45 minutes long) were conducted, and informal chats with staff members took place almost every day while the researcher was at the Drop-in Centre. Ethnographic data was used to depict the sort of narrative that was in use at the time the study was conducted. Archival data and interviews additionally helped to identify other stories that did not appear in the organizational lore.

Data Analysis

Formal analysis started by transcribing all interview recordings. Interviews that were not recorded, due to the participants' preference, were typed up after the interview from detailed notes taken. Field notes and recordings from other meetings (training, work meetings, conferences) were selectively typed up. When a meeting record was not transcribed, a short paragraph was written to summarize the content of the meeting to facilitate future referral. Consequently two separate files were produced. In one file, I compiled all stories, defined in the broadest sense of the word, and tagged them by the name of their narrator, and certain attributes of the narrator, such as approximate age, gender, ethnicity, education, and number of years worked at CYC. Stories were read several times and subsequently were coded with the main themes of each story, for example, 'violence during the early days', 'unprofessionalism during the early days'. Stories were analyzed for their morphologic content using plot analysis (Boje 2001, Gabriel 1991) where stories with tragic, heroic, and comic content were discovered. These plots were used to think about the possible symbolic dimension of storytelling in the organization drawing on organizational storytelling literature. In a separate analysis, all the interview transcripts were entered into Nvivo. The manuscript was initially categorized using two generic codes, 1) discussions regarding the organization, and 2) discussions regarding clients. This was further elaborated into themes such as 'views about change in the organization', 'views about professionalization', 'staff as heroes', 'frustration with clients', 'handling (angry) young people", and so forth. I used these themes primarily to make sense of the narrative domain of the organization, and to form general ideas about common themes of mnemonic conversation in CYC.

In the next step, I was particularly attentive to differences between various accounts and tried to make sense of these disparities. Similar to Gabriel (1991a, 1995, 2000), differences in viewpoints were treated as central evidence informing the research, rather than a sign of the lack of coherence in the data. This divergence led to 'surprises' (Willis, 1980) or 'mysteries' (Alvesson & Karreman, 2007) which sparked my curiosity to find a theoretically compelling answer to those dilemmas. The dilemma at hand in this paper is the silence of a group of staff members. Various explanations were developed drawing on theory and analysis of the text. These explanations were judged against each other, considering the organizational context.

When different interpretations were possible, I followed Gabriel and Griffiths'(2004) four corroborating techniques to provide a more compelling analysis. These techniques are:

1. Show internal consistency: different signs and cues point at the same direction.
2. Demonstrate that specific outcomes are over determined, that is different mechanisms can be established that lead to the same outcome.
3. Make clear what evidences would lead to their refutation (this is different from positivistic falsification).
4. Show how strong interpretation address, account for, and supersede less strong ones.

(Gabriel & Griffiths 2004, p.123)

The story of CYC

Cheningham Youth Centre (CYC) started as a small Drop-in Centre (all the names are pseudonyms) to provide therapeutic services to children in deprived neighborhoods in Cheningham (pseudonym), a large city in UK. The people that charity was working with included a diverse range of ethnic minorities. When CYC began its operations, its premises were raided frequently by neighboring gangs who saw the Centre as an intrusion into their territory, or who were merely after financial gains. At this time, the majority of CYC's clients were adolescents in their 20s who would have regularly

picked fights with staff members or with each other. To cope with this hostile situation, the founder of CYC (Sarah), employed several local staff (mostly male from ethnic minorities) who grew up in the under-privileged neighborhoods. Although these street level staff members did not have the relevant experience and training, they were essential to the survival of the organization in the early years, as they helped the organization to gain the trust of the community. They also increased organizational capability to contain the youth by enabling the organization to negotiate and deal with attacks and fights in its premises. Over the next 12 years, CYC grew slowly but steadily and managed to earn several awards for its contribution to the life of vulnerable children. The staff composition remained largely dominated by people from the neighborhood, with a proportionally smaller group of staff coming from a professional background. During this time, work processes did not change substantially.

As CYC grew bigger in size, the organization started to develop professional processes and procedures. This turn to professionalization and bureaucratization became faster post 2009, after CYC absorbed a substantial governmental grant. CYC subsequently transformed from a small Drop-in Centre to a multi-disciplinary children's Centre with the ability to provide specialized services to the various needs of young people. Within this period, the number of service users grew from 500 to about 2000 children who got support from this Centre on a daily basis. Organizational structures and workforces were developed to support such a transformation. The organization substantially increased its body of workforce to match the demand. The number of staff doubled from approximately 50 in 2009 to about 100 full time staff members in 2012. In a stark contrast with staff recruited prior to 2009, most new staff members had university degrees and professional qualifications. By 2012, more than half of the staff members at CYC, which was previously dominated by local workers (without qualifications), had degrees in disciplines related to childcare such as psychology, psychotherapy, social work, and counselling.

Post 2009, CYC also redefined its client base to focus on the needs of children under 16. CYC had also developed more rigid work structures, with a clear division of labor and job specifications. The focus on those aged below 16 years of age and new procedures significantly decreased the frequencies of violent behavior by clients. An after-school club was formally launched with several pre-planned activities designed to respond to the needs of different age groups. CYC also developed bureaucratic structures to increase the visibility of the staff, their activities and performance. Any request for financial/material support to clients was processed by a committee in the Head Office, in stark contrast with the old practices during the formative years (2000- 2008) when individual key-workers or managers could make the call. Key-workers were instructed to record any cause for concern and the details of any intervention in relevant forms and submit them to the Head Office. These elements of bureaucratization, which were established in the last four years, focused either on the control of the financial resources, or on recording, and sharing information about clients.

These structural changes were often recalled by staff members to differentiate former practices (prior to 2009) from the recent practices (post 2009). Workers who started their work prior to 2009 were often labeled as 'old-hand' employees versus 'new employees', that is, those who joined post 2009. During the time I conducted my research at CYC, I found that new staff members, who were mostly young university graduates, were often critical of the old way of doing things at CYC. They thought the old services were unprofessional and unstructured.

> *You know CYC was criticized for not being professional. Staff used to rely on their own personal*
> *life experiences which could be risky. (Interview, a new staff member)*

New staff members considered the organizational changes as a positive improvement which would help organization to be more professional and accountable.

> *Doing paper work might be time consuming, but people should accept that this enables us to be*
> *more accountable. Now that CYC is a bigger organization, we need such reporting systems. We*
> *are also able do more analysis which helps us to improve our services. (Interview, a new member*
> *of staff).*

Older staff members, on the contrary, did not see these changes as positive and certainly not necessarily an improvement. They believed that the new structures were in fact adding to the current problems. The rigidity of newly introduced structures, they thought, could hamper service delivery to children when they needed it.

New structures are actually at times quite problematic. Management wants to be stricter in terms of imposing the regulations. But young people [clients] have different needs, and their needs should come first. It is not a business you know. Sometime you see children do not get the help they need because of new structure. This is what I'm struggling with. (Interview, old-hand member of staff).

Old-hand staff members were also concerned about the changes in the customer base. The stabilization of work conditions and the disappearance of physical clashes, they thought, were not a sign of CYC's success, but a result of the organization's strategic reorientation.

We do not have as many clashes and fights as we used to have ... But I'm not sure if that's a good thing. When I started here, quite a lot of those things were happening. I say we are now more institutional .... So, I think young people in our Centre, the really violent ones, we could not really tolerate them anymore. We are now working with a different range [of clients] really. (Interview, old-hand member of staff).

Memories of the past (pre- 2009) were of significant importance for these staff members who saw the success of CYC as a result of their hard work in the past.

Interrogating a story: plot analysis and contextual analysis

One day a young person came into our site to pick a fight; he had a knife with him and so we called the police. In the meantime, Declan tried to save this young person [from trouble]. Despite the danger, he tried to talk to him, and calm him down before the arrival of the police. Before we knew, the street became full of policemen, three, four vans. They did not realize that Declan is a member of staff- as we did not have staff badges at the time- and so they started beating him. [Laugh] Oh my god! Then all of a sudden police was one side, fighting members of staff. It was hilarious! (Interview)

This is how Mierra, an old-hand member of staff described her memories of the past (pre-2009) in the course of an interview. Some other old-hand members of staff recounted similar- but not exactly the same- stories- during the individual interviews. Conventional story research treats a modest reappearance of a story as a sign that such stories are part of the organizational lore. They then question what the function of such a story is, and what made such a story worth telling. I first followed the standard plot analysis methods used in storytelling (David M. Boje, 2001; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998; Czarniawska, 2004; Yiannis Gabriel, 1991c; Kostera, 2007; Propp, 1968).

The story starts by an epic tale in which one of the staff puts his life in jeopardy to save the offending young person from trouble. However, the story becomes comic when the police mistook Declan for the aggressor (undeserved misfortune). The story ends in a comic tragedy; a full fight between staff members and the police forces. The fight was both an organizational scandal and a comical event as both institutions (the police and the charity) considered themselves working for the greater good. The story teller adds a few sentences to her story to emphasize the dramatic scene, and its possible harmful consequences for the organization.

[The CEO] was not impressed! She was not sure how this would go down in Downing Street! Everyone sending letters of apology! Everyone was really sorry! (Interview)

Analyzing a story according to plots can reveal how a story is structured. The plot analysis also provides some indication of the function of stories. The epic aspect of the story could be associated with 'wish fulfilment' (Gabriel 1991) - of seeing oneself as heroic via identification with the hero. It also could be interpreted as a sign of employees' genuine commitment (Brown & Humphreys, 2003) to the charity to the extent that they were willing to 'self-sacrifice' for the organization (Gransden, 1984, p. 106). Old-hand staff members thought these stories represented their genuine love for the children:

> *We had payment problems [in addition to hard working conditions], but the core group of people*
> *we were there because we wanted to be there, not for the money (Jo, Interview).*

The comic narrative has been shown to work as a protective device, preparing individuals for possible misfortune. Gabriel's (1991b) study of stories in the military seem to be comparable to the story about the scuffle with the police at CYC. Gabriel discusses the different functions of a common story theme in the military which is developed around incidences of severe punishment that soldiers suffer for small mistakes. Gabriel suggested that, in the military, one of the functions of such stories, which are shaped around 'undeserved misfortune', is to warn employees of the imminent dangers (Yiannis Gabriel, 1991b, p. 332). Such a "signal of anxiety" alerts organizational actors and reduces the severity of potential trauma (Gabriel 1991, p.329).

The function of such stories could be also discussed as a vehicle of knowledge sharing and learning in organizations (Connell, Klein, & Meyer, 2004; Rhodes, 1996). Snowden (2002), among others, discusses the role of stories in conveying high levels of complexity and tacit knowledge. In this case, the memories of fights and physical clashes could share the knowledge and readiness for dealing with gangs, dealing with angry kids carrying a knife in their hand and so forth. It could also perhaps be seen as an instrument to enforce management policies, such as encouraging staff members to have their badge at work to avoid such dramatic consequences (Wilkins, 1983).

This story shares many of the qualities that scholars count for durable stories in organizations: it has a specific plot which entertains and generates substantial emotions (Czarniawska-Joerges & Czarniawska, 2004; Yiannis Gabriel, 1991a, , 2000). This story has additional elements which scholars identified as common in stories in organizations. Firstly, it draws attention to the heroic deeds of one of the dedicated employees, Declan, who had worked for the company for more than 10 years and was still working at the CYC as a Centre manager. Secondly, it touches on personal misfortunes and accidents which is another common theme in organizational stories (Linstead, 1985). Such an undeserved misfortune is a main theme of organizational humor (Gabriel 1991). This particular story thus seems to have combined elements of the three different plots – epic, comic, tragic- which Gabriel (1991c) identifies in memorable stories in organizations – in one narrative.

Moreover, the story seems to have been plotted powerfully (combining three different genres) which gives it a flexibility to be interpreted from different perspectives. It could be recounted among old-hand members of staff to celebrate their heroic performances, as Sam, a member of staff who has been working in the Centre for the last seven years recalled.

> *You know, things that we engaged with in the past were so dangerous. People actually got*
> *injured. What we do now, compared to the past, is like a kindergarten. (Interview, Sam, an old-*
> *hand staff member)*

The story also could potentially be used by staff members who did not identify with this heroic image of longstanding staff members to ridicule the particular member of staff for his misfortune and carelessness. To paraphrase Davies, such stories could be potentially appealing to both top dogs and underdogs because they read the story in completely different ways (Davies1984, p.155 cited in Gabriel 1991).

Yet despite this attraction and tractability, I found that such stories about the organization distant past (before 2009) which reflected on the heroic encounters of staff members (and which were produced in interview setting) were not part of the local lore. During my ethnographic study, I observed a range of issues that filled the story space of CYC in different conversational forms, from rumor to argument, to humor. The popular topics of conversation were- but not limited to- key workers' interactions with head office, complaints about managers, interactions with the CEO, key workers' challenges in helping their clients, and changes in human resources. The narrative about the past, however, seemed to lack spirit. It was rarely brought up in conversations. If there was any reference to the past in conversations among staff, it was laconic and transient. The following quote which was relayed to me by an employee who joined the organization 3 years ago best captures this:

> Do you want to know about CYC? One word describes CYC's past; chaos. (Field note).

Many staff members, in particular the new employees (who joined after changes post 2009), did not seem to be interested in the organization's past. New employees were not curious to know about the days that preceded their arrival to

the organization, as they felt that there was nothing to learn from the past. When they were directly asked if they knew about events that happened in the past, most staff- with a few exceptions- could not produce any rich stories about the past. Their impressions of the past were short and mostly conveyed one prototypic idea of the past: chaos, fights, and violence.

> *I do not know what they [older people] say. When CYC first opened, it was wild, I mean really*
> *really wild. People would have come with guns, knives, puked around, and crashed everything*
> *they could. (Interview, a new employee).*

In these accounts, the organization survived a harsh period to grow into a multi-disciplinary and professional child protection Centre. They depict a chaotic work environment, without any structure, which could not even control the youth which it was supposed to help.

> *I do not know much about the past. But there have been lots of fights before. That's what I heard.*
> *That's one thing that has improved. Things are now more controllable and manageable.*
> *(Interview, a new member of staff)*

They referred to the past vaguely as "Something that has changed" and expressed relief that such events have stopped. But no further explanation of the subject is sought after from this generation of employees. Why did such fights occur? How did CYC manage to put an end to those fights?

Accounting for untold Stories

One would expect stories of heroic encounters by staff members to be circulated in a small organization like CYC, rather than remain untold. Why do members of the organization recall those harsh times (such as fights) but not the heroic acts of its members? The peculiarity of this situation becomes clearer when an analogy is made with war heroes. Nations always remember wars by remembering the soldiers who fought (and died) in the war. Old-hand local staff members were the saviors of CYC and its staff members in the first decade of organization life. Although these street level staff members did not have the relevant experience and training, they increased organizational capability to contain the youth by enabling the organization to negotiate and deal with the attacks and fights in its premises. As the CYC founder put it:

> *We were working in a very insecure environment, and we needed the local street level staff to*
> *handle the situation. It wouldn't be the middle class white female worker who jumps in front of*
> *the knife, it would be more unqualified person who were more used to the neighborhood. [...] it is*
> *because of people like them that CYC survived. (Interview with CYC founder)*

Despite this acknowledgement by the founder, old-hand staff member's heroic work is not celebrated by the new staff members. This raises the question as to how older staff members could remain silent when new member of staff do not seem to remember the past and their sacrifices the way they do.

The literature discussing untold stories is not as abundant as that relating to other areas of organizational storytelling. Yet, a number of explanations can be found for withholding speech in the broader social science literature. The most obvious reason for not recounting stories is memory failure (Stone, Coman, Brown, Koppel, & Hirst, 2012). People cannot tell stories which they do not mentally remember. Alternatively, psychoanalytic research reveals that people often avoid talking about "difficult past" to cope with trauma or to deny shameful acts (Freud, 1964; Olick, 2007; Sturken, 1997; Wagner-Pacifici & Schwartz, 1991). This could also happen in a collective level. Turks, for instance, enthusiastically tell stories on the triumphs of the Ottoman Empire, while remaining silent about their treatment of Armenians (Akçam, 2006). Gabriel (2000) suggests that narrative deskilling could hamper storytelling. In other words, workers may not have the narrative skills to entertain the audience with their stories. Finally Goffman (1959) reminds us that controlling information could be another motive for not sharing stories with others. Withholding storytelling, as explained by Goffman (1959), involves controlling information (and stories) which often could mark an individual as a member of a group and help differentiate the members of the team from others (Colón-Aguirre, 2013). The silence of old-hand staff members at CYC, however, was not due to (mental) forgetting, trauma, or shame. They remembered the stories clearly and they were proud

(rather than shameful) about their performance in the past. Nor can their silence be attributed to narrative deskilling or secrete keeping. Not much effort or persuasion was needed to convince staff members to share their stories with me. Many old-hand staff members, though admittedly not all, recounted their stories skilfully and passionately.

An alternative explanation which is highlighted by critical management scholars attributes employee's lack of voice due to oppression and management hegemony over discursive practices (Clegg, 1989; Gramsci, Nowell-Smith, & Hoare, 1971; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). In other words, old-hand workers' storytelling attempts could have been suppressed by senior management. This could be a plausible interpretation, given recent organizational transformation, and CYC's senior management attempts to change the way the charity used to operate. Munro (1998) argues that a 'rubbishing' of the past within organizations may be aimed at undermining aspects of members' belonging, especially matters of tradition, loyalty and custom. Strangleman (1999) show how British Rail managers used this technique to seek cultural and image change. Similarly, CYC management could be assumed to have used the negative impression of the past to justify the manipulation of the present.

Post 2009, senior managers of CYC tried to create structures that supported the growth of the charity and facilitated the transition to a more professional organization (details were laid out earlier in the section which outlines 'The story of CYC'). These new structures and processes aimed at increasing standardization, specialization and controllability of services. These also had resulted in further bureaucratization and formalization of the organization which faced strong resistance from staff, especially older members of staff. It thus could be argued that by attaching negative meanings, such as chaos and violence, to the past, CYC managers were trying to rationalize successive change processes in favor of bringing more structure.

The success of management's endeavor to manipulate workers' perceptions, however, is questionable. Munro and Strangleman's research only analyzed the narrative used in management rhetoric, without investigating if they succeed in changing workers perception of the past. Research in social psychology provides evidence that people are likely to forget elements of the past after they were told a related narrative which excluded those aspects of the past (Anderson & Green, 2001; Cuc et al. 2007). Extending this finding to organizational life, it could be suggested that the propagation of a narrative of the past in which the heroic deeds of older staff are excluded could result in induced forgetting of those aspects of the past. This mechanism could explain why many workers, even those who worked at the organization for a long time - but were not involved in settling the fights - could forget these memories, as they had no personal relation to those events.

This is not, however, the case for staff members who took pride in their active engagement in containing the most hardcore adolescence in CYC. Barnier et al. (2004) suggest that memories that are self-defining and self-relevant are less subject to retrieval induced forgetting (see also McAdams, 2001). Thus, induced forgetting through senior management manipulation of the past could not fully explain why members of staff who took pride in those memories did not story their experience in the organization.

Moreover, research in narrative studies shows that story-telling space cannot be fully managed (Yiannis Gabriel, 1995; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Organization agents' desires, anxieties and emotions are expressed in organization stories, myths, jokes and gossip. In CYC, staff members seemed to freely talk about problems they have with management among their peers, in spite of hesitating to communicate it directly to senior managers. Organization members frequently discussed recent and past incidents openly, and there did not seem to be any direct pressure from above impairing storytelling practice. If this narrative silence is not imposed on older members of staff from senior management, why did they abort storytelling practice which could earn them power as the raconteur? (Yiannis Gabriel, 1991a).

Organizational Transformations and Irrelevance of Old Stories

Despite their strong attachment to past memories and old practices, it seems that older staff members did not try to negate the negative impression of the past that was depicted in the organization for the younger staff. In the previous section, I showed that neither of the explanations outlined in the literature, such as forgetting, trauma, shame, narrative deskilling, information guarding and management hegemony, can fully explain the silence of CYC's old-hand members of staff. In fact old-hand staff members were proud of their performance in the past, but they were not interested in sharing their memories with other staff members, irrespective of management pressure. When they were directly asked about their silence, they seem to be ambivalent in talking about their memories in the organization. They mentioned that they found their stories insignificant and irrelevant in the current organization.

*Those stories are not significant anymore! I mean they represent the degree of difficulty that what
we were dealing in our work. But those stories may not be relevant anymore! (Interview, Mierra,
an old-hand member of staff).*

*I do not know. Things are different. You know, our memories won't relate to the new conditions.
We have different client groups, and ... (Interview, Jo, an old-hand member of staff).*

Here it seemed that 'irrelevance' of old memories to the charity daily life had contributed to old-hand staff member withholding storytelling. Little is written on the notion of 'irrelevance' in management literature. To understand the notion of irrelevance, I draw on Maurice Halbwachs, a sociologist, who extensively wrote about collective memory. Halbwachs (1992/1925) observes that in traditional societies, "the elderly absorb themselves in the past because they enjoy the leisure of determining the details of past traditions and teaching them to the young during initiation" (Halbwachs 1992, p.48). In other words, older people's stories are attended to because they have much valuable experience as the guardians of traditions. But what if these experiences are not considered valuable? Halbwachs suggests that when people are absorbed in everyday preoccupations, they are not interested in the past which is irrelevant to their current activity. To clarify this point, Halbwachs (1992/1925) draws on family memories, and suggests that young people initially are hardly interested in what precedes their arrival to the family. However this initial disinterest will change as individuals go through the stages of their life through which their parents have passed earlier (such as marrying, becoming a parent, and such like). To paraphrase Halbwachs, only at those stages can individuals identify themselves with what their parents were at the time (Halbwachs 1992, p.80). In this example, Halbwachs suggests that a group- such as a family- can sustain a collective memory only when the interests and concerns of its members converge.

Similarly, new staff members of CYC had few traditions in common with old-hand staff members. The professionalization of the charity meant that old practices were not much respected. New staff members were mostly recruited based on their academic credentials. The skill and knowledge they valued was based on a professional approach, informed by modern psychology and counselling. This skilled workforce thus tended to undermine the credibility of experience-based knowledge of old-hand staff most of whom did not have any professional training.

*I cannot approve of what CYC has been doing before. The old system in CYC was set up to fail!
We used to make the young people too dependent on us. Theoretically, we should support the
client in a way that they gradually become more independent, and then when they have their own
children, they could be able to support them. We should not only address their current practical
needs, we should help them to build their own self-esteem. (Interview, a new member of staff)*

With the expansion of a university-educated workforce, the position of the older staff members as the knowledge bearers in the organization was thus challenged (see Gabriel, 2000, for a discussion on experience vs. science). New educated workforce often questioned the way old-hand staff members interacted with children, in that they were not qualified in giving therapeutic service, in that they did not know how to keep their professional distance, and so forth. As a new member of staff put it,

*Simply, they are not professional! Most of them are used to give merely practical help to their
clients! Instead of providing therapeutic support, they are like an admin for the clients.
(Interview, a new member of staff)*

In addition, CYC started to focus on younger children as a part of its organizational restructuring. This meant key workers did not need to deal with adolescents who caused much of the fights and physical clashes in the past. Stories about those days (especially the violent encounters with client groups) were not relevant to the work in the present, in other words these stories did not help new keyworkers to make sense of the job or organization. Hence, old stories lost their function in terms of sense-making. Nor were they functional in transmitting knowledge to new generations.

Although people had similar job titles, and were apparently doing the same job as workers would have done in the past, the nature of the job had changed. Young children (4-16) have different needs compared with older adolescents who were the target group in CYC before restructuring program. The knowledge that could be shared via epic stories of old-

hand staff members, such as dealing with gangs, dealing with angry kids carrying a knife and so forth did not contribute much to the staff members' ability to do their work in the current setting. Consequently, a different set of techniques, skills, and knowledge was required to deal with the new client group.

Younger staff members, who came from a professional background, saw these violent incidents as an indication that they are inheriting an unprofessional organization. They did not seem to give any credit to the old practices that earned CYC its reputation.

> *I do not think CYC was able to provide a professional service to children before. I even doubt if*
> *they allocated an individual key-worker to every client. It was just more like a Drop-in Centre,*
> *doing mainly some sort of crisis intervention. (Interview, a new member of staff).*

They believed the Organization was not structured to fit its purpose. Old practices, in their view, were not scientifically designed which aggravated the problems with demanding youth.

> There was not any proper plan for children. The youth would come to CYC primarily to get
> money. CYC did not have any structure for distributing goods, and [...] so there was always a
> tension as some clients demanded more! (Field note, a new member of staff)

The need for a signal of anxiety- that alerts key workers about the potential for physical clashes- in CYC had also diminished by the changes in the client group. In addition, the organization had developed other structures and routines, for instance, a specialized security team, which had substantially decreased the need for staff members' readiness for potential attacks. Since the risk of physical clashes with adolescents was not imminent in CYC anymore, new staff members did not need such stories as a signal of anxiety. In summary, stories about the old days of violence were not relevant anymore, as they did not help new members of staff make sense of their job, or to prepare them for challenges they experienced in work.

Summary, discussion and theoretical implications

Narrative research has long studied organizational stories and their various roles and functions in organizations. Most of this literature, however, relies on text (or speech) as the primary source of information and ignores the constitutional role of context in giving meaning to stories (Deetz, 2003; Hansen, 2006). This shortcoming hampered attempts to understand nuances of storytelling in situ (Boje 2008) and resulted in a failure to capture context specific matters, such as possible transformations in the narrative domain. As a result, many stories discussed in academic circles as local lore, may in fact have long disappeared from the organization narrative domain (Whittle 2009). In contrast to this literature, this paper starts with the axiom that contextual grounding of story analysis can be fruitful in pointing to new (and more plausible) interpretations of text (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1998) which could be otherwise overlooked. This contextual sensitivity can be achieved through long term and intensive ethnographic research (Geertz, 1973). Combining an ethnographic approach with semi-structured interviews provides an opportunity to study how organizational stories are implicated in organizational members' everyday working lives (Whittle, Mueller, & Mangan, 2009, p. 427), and to link stories to social relations and identities at the workplace. One implication of this approach is that untold stories become more apparent where untold refers to significant stories that might be revealed in interviews but are not recounted in daily work conversations (and are not known by the majority of employees).

Drawing on empirical material gathered from an ethnographic study in CYC over a period of six months, I presented a number of stories told to me by CYC old-hand members of staff. These stories were powerful and engaging, and were capable of generating substantial emotions. Some combined elements from different plots, i.e. epic, comic and tragic plots. They were often narrated to show the heroic (epic) performance of old-hand members of staff. I showed that analysis of stories merely based on interviews (without attending to contextual insights) could mislead the researcher. The plot analysis of elicited stories indicated that a number of potential functions for those stories were conceivable. Yet, contrary to common sense expectation, I found out that old-hand staff members were reluctant to share their stories outside the interview context. This paper took up the task of understanding why those individuals' memories were not used in collective remembrance. I investigated different explanations highlighted in the literature, i.e. memory loss, shame, trauma, fear, narrative deskilling or management hegemony, and suggested that neither of these factors could fully

account for the silence of old-hand staff members at CYC. Instead, I argued that the irrelevance of old epic stories to the new working conditions was a determining factor in the old-hand staff members' abortion of storytelling attempts.

This irrelevance was caused by the restructuring of CYC which made the work processes more structured and bureaucratic, services more specialized, and the division of labor more clear. These changes also meant that CYC stated recruiting a proportionately higher number of young university graduate specialized in various scientific disciplines related to child care. This changed the composition of workforce which was previously dominated by local workers (without qualifications) to a mostly young professional body of workers. This new workforce had few traditions in common with the old work force. They were critical of old practices and ways of doing things which they labelled as 'unprofessional'. CYC also started to focus on younger children as a part of its organizational restructuring. Staff thus required different set of skills and knowledge. This meant key workers did not need to deal with adolescents who caused much of the fights and physical clashes in the past. Also a clearer division of labor meant that a specialized security team dealt with any outbreaks and staff did not have similar concerns about such violent incidents. These changes made the old stories irrelevant by making them void of meaning; they were not helping workers to make sense of their work, nor did they prepare staff members for possible eventualities. Employees absorbed in everyday preoccupations were not thus interested in the stories which were irrelevant to their everyday activities.

Irrelevance may appear to be a weak force compared with the power that is consolidated in management hands. The findings of this paper, however, indicate that irrelevance could be stronger than conventional management instruments in killing old stories. While it is believed that organizational story space is an unmanaged terrain where management has less sway (Gabriel, 1995, p.479), this paper demonstrated that change management programs can potentially silence certain old stories. This is not, however, through direct pressure or discursive domination (Brown & Coupland, 2005), rather by abolishing old practices, management is able to make old stories irrelevant. Relevance, I suggest, is like an oxygen for stories; it may be taken for granted when it is there, but when it is taken away it has serious suffocating consequences. Change management programs thus may silence certain employees (potentially those antagonists of change) by making their stories irrelevant.

Acknowledgement

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