

## RETELLING STORIES IN ORGANIZATIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTIONS OF NARRATIVE REPETITION

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Scholars have yet to explore narrative repetition—when a story is recalled and retold from another narrative—for its rich conceptual depth. To build a case for this area, we analyze stories from scholarly research to identify the functions of narrative repetition. We distinguish three dualities produced through repetition, which are grounded in cultural issues of sameness and difference. These dualities—control/resistance, differentiation/integration, and stability/change—bring a more sophisticated understanding of the inherent complexity of narrative as a mode of interpretation and offer a transformative view of narrative that describes how the meaning of stories shifts over time. When people repeat stories, some individuals may interpret a narrative of stability, whereas others may hear a hint of change. Furthermore, we offer narrative repetition as a new methodology for organizational research with the recommendation that scholars use the recurrence of a story as a starting point for inquiry into the cultural life of organizations.

In recent years scholars have become increasingly aware of the importance of narratives in organizations. For example, management scholars have recognized narrative's role in culture (e.g., Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Parada & Viladás, 2010), strategic management (e.g., Dunford & Jones, 2000; McConkie & Boss, 1986; Sonenshein, 2010), and identity (e.g., Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005; Chreim, 2005; Huy, 2008; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). They have also used narrative as a methodology for organizational studies (e.g., Quinn & Worline, 2008; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). Implicitly acknowledged, however, is the significance of narratives that get repeated regularly in organizations. Whether over the water cooler or in a formal quarterly meeting, people retell stories in organizations all the time. Yet the narrative literature has given little attention to the form, function, and implications of the recurrence of stories.

Narrative repetition refers to the retelling or circulation of organizational stories. Previous research has noted that similar stories are often told (Martin et al., 1983), that employees perform stories repeatedly (Boje, 1991), and that group members may mirror or "chain out" the same story in the dynamic sharing of group fantasies (Bormann, 1972). In addition, Myers (2002) has proposed the

notion of theme repetition and metapatterns in organizations, where individuals repeat the themes of unnoticed interpretations of social settings. However, narrative scholars have yet to recognize retelling a secondhand story as a kind of communicative event. Because of the prevalence of narrative repetition, a better understanding of retelling can make a major contribution to narrative theory. Here we create a conceptual framework that specifies the functions that narrative repetition may serve in organizations.

Although management and narrative theory lack conceptual literature on retelling a story, budding literature in linguistics serves as a useful starting point for the study of narrative repetition in organizations. Mushin, for example, used the term "narrative retelling" to describe when "speakers talk about information they only know by virtue of what has been told to them by the previous narrator, a canonical hearsay" (2000: 929). Linguistics scholars typically conduct research in laboratories and investigate retellings of elicited stories, rather than naturally occurring narratives (see Norrick, 1998, for a review). In general, studies show that not all retellings contain the same amount of information; for example, retellings to attentive listeners are longer than stories retold to inattentive listeners (Pasupathi, Stallworth, &

Mordoch, 1998). This research also shows that retellings depend on how much the audience needs to know in order to understand the story (Marsh, 2007).

Within the existing literature in linguistics that explains how stories are retold, the most interesting finding is that storytellers rarely focus on preserving the essence of the narrative. Specifically, "most people who retell a story are unlikely to care very much whether the story they retell is the same, detail by detail, as the story they originally heard" (Gauld & Stephenson, 1967: 40). Indeed, conversational retellings are not very accurate, and "different patterns of distortions . . . [are] associated with different retelling purposes" (Marsh, 2007: 17). When stories are repeated, the narrative form changes based on the speaker's goals, the audience, and the context in which he or she is speaking. As Norrick notes, this variation "is probably most pronounced in cases of polyphonic narration in natural conversation, where no single participant can control the course of the narrative, and multiple voices vie for the right to formulate the point of the story" (1998: 77). This finding has important implications when applying linguistic research to the study of narrative repetition in organizations, where multiple people know, share, and interpret the same stories. Even though organizations are central sites for retellings, the linguistics literature does not examine repeated stories in organizational contexts.

In this article we develop theory to explain retellings of organizational stories. In doing so we identify the dualities produced through repetition, which are grounded in the cultural issues of sameness and difference. These dualities—control/resistance, differentiation/integration, and stability/change—bring a more sophisticated understanding of the inherent complexity of narrative as a mode of interpretation. We also articulate a view of narrative that describes how the meaning of a story can shift over time. Narrative repetition both extends and reinterprets our understanding of narrative, since it serves as a unique way to explain how stories are contested and changed in organizations.

We begin by defining narrative repetition and situating its importance in the context of organizations. Next, we explain its often complex functions in organizations. We conclude with some implications of this theoretical development and its prospects for further research.

## DEFINING NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVE REPETITION

We are premising here an all-encompassing conception of narrative. Essentially, stories must have an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end—that is, "events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995: 5). This "story" format makes narrative distinct from any other communicative form. Furthermore, narratives either state or imply causality, which distinguishes them from other sequential forms, such as chronicles. Finally, narratives, unlike other communicative forms, are situated in time and space. They always convey an awareness of when and where the action takes place.

But narratives are more than just storytelling. As Taylor and Van Every (2000) noted, narrative is a mode of reasoning—indeed, a primary way we cognitively process social information. Narrative is also emotionally charged, since stories are ways of knowing and remembering personal meaning (Ricoeur, 2004) and make up our understandings of reality (Bruner, 1986).

As reflected in the examples provided herein, narratives come in myriad forms. Barthes (1996), for instance, mentioned oral and written language, pictures, gestures, myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings, movies, local news, and conversation as narrative forms. In addition, health records, organizational documents, and folk ballads may also be considered narrative (Riessman, 2008). In our analysis we conceive of narratives as having four key features: they "(1) foreshadow a problem, (2) provide a sequential rendering of actions in the face of complications leading toward resolution, (3) achieve closure, [and] (4) invite or pronounce moral implications" (Browning & Morris, 2012: 32).

Following Weick (1979), who argued that talk constitutes organizational reality, our perspective is that organizations emerge through communication (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). From this sensemaking perspective, organizations are narratively constructed (Bruner, 1991) and stories are constitutive of organizations. Thus, our definition of what counts as "organizational" is expansive enough to include events occurring outside organizations, such as in the home, the community, or society at large, because such

sites are common for workplace conversations in which organizational stories are exchanged.

Now that we have defined narrative, we can proceed with our conceptualization of narrative repetition.

### Narrative Repetition

Retelling, reiteration, circularity, repeating, tautology, restatement, echoing, recurrence, recapitulation, replication, recitation, rerunning—all are common variations on one term: repetition. In its simplest form, repetition provides the building blocks of social systems, for “structure implies a repetitive relationship between two or more individuals” (Goldspink & Kay, 2009: 3). Instead of focusing on mere repetition, however, here we focus on repetition in narrative. In other words, rather than seeking to understand the function of a ticking clock or a list of rules, we are interested in the circulation of culture via narratives.

We define narrative repetition as the recurrence of a story. Narrative repetition occurs when a story is recalled *from another narrative* that one has heard (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Repetitions may also vary in character and extent, for, being retellings, they are apt to be particularly selective. Thus, we acknowledge that although the entire story may have actually evolved in some ways (Whelan, Huber, Rose, Davies, & Clandinin, 2010), the general spirit or main idea of the story remains intact. In other words, its essence is repeated. In his research on storytelling in the catering industry, for example, Gabriel (2000) noted that on various occasions different employees would bring up the same story, unprompted. Despite the presence of such narratives, few scholars have explored narrative repetition and the functionality of retelling stories in organizations.

Importantly, narrative repetition differs from firsthand storytelling—when some event is *directly* recalled from real or imagined experience and is then told (reproduced) by a narrator in story form. Firsthand narratives are a “reproduction of reality” (Polster, 1987: 26) because anyone who tells a story is attempting to recount a past set of circumstances. We choose not to include these stories as part of narrative repetition, for any story would then be classified as a form of narrative repetition. Scholars have referred to direct storytelling as “mimesis”—an imitation or

representation of action—where the narrative represents the events as experienced by the characters (Aristotle, 1967; Ricoeur, 1984). Such mimesis does not qualify as narrative repetition.

To date, narrative theory has focused on direct storytelling or mimesis—stories that typically require explanation, creativity, drama, and transportation (Green & Brock, 2000). The storyteller must infuse the narrative with his or her desired meaning while still adhering to the ethics of verisimilitude (Fisher, 1987) and producing a tale that at least vaguely resembles his or her experiences. The limits of direct storytelling may be smaller than narrative repetition because events can only be transformed up to a point, particularly if other individuals were involved in the experience (e.g., “the fish wasn’t *that* big”).

In comparison to direct storytelling, scholars have given less attention to narrative repetition, yet narrative repetition still requires as much political artfulness as mimesis, since the storyteller repeats the narrative to serve a particular function. A teller has to judge how to package the story so that it elicits a comforting recognition and remains a repetition. But the narrator must also emphasize or deemphasize aspects of the narrative so that it serves his or her own means. To engender a desired response, these narratives also require imagination, drama, and influence. In narrative repetition the storyteller can rely on the existing story and infuse it with the same or new meaning. When there is nothing to draw from in an existing story, or if a narrative cannot be molded to fit a specific function (perhaps a story about office organization cannot be retold to elicit change), the teller may have to search for a new story. Thus, some narratives may fail to travel.

When stories are retold, they serve a specific purpose or function, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Polster, 1987). During narrative repetition, a person recounts the same event or narrative, yet the meaning may be new:

The repetition of a previously described event usually serves to change, or add to, the emphasis on the meaning of that event. . . . The same event is presented as more, or less, pleasant, innocent, or important than we had previously believed it to be. It is thus both identical and different: the fabula elements are the same, but the meaning has changed (Bal, 2009: 90–91).

Even two literally identical texts are not “understood” as truly identical. Two events are never exactly the same (Bal, 2009) because communication is situated in context, so the same story may produce different effects in various times and places. For this reason, context and audience are also vital aspects of narrative repetition. Certain contexts or audiences may facilitate narrative repetition, too. For example, newcomers or younger organizational members may hear more repeated stories about work hours, budgets, or hierarchy because they are in the process of learning organizational norms.

Having defined narrative and narrative repetition, we can now consider their functions in organizations.

### Functions of Narrative Repetition in Organizations

To explore the functions of narrative repetition in organizations, we followed the methodology of Martin and colleagues (1983) and systematically searched for examples of repeated organizational stories in the academic organizational literature. We counted narratives as “repetitive” when (a) stories were restated to others or (b) organizational members heard the stories from someone else. To be clear, we did not consider narratives “repetitive” when interviewees recounted stories to researchers, since we could not determine if such retellings would be naturally occurring or elicited.

Once we had collected these stories, we thematically organized them by their purpose or, using Barthes’ (1975) conception, by their narrative function. In many cases the storyteller, listener, or researcher explicitly stated the purpose(s) of the retelling. Besides identifying the functions of repeated stories, we also drew from narrative theory, organization theory, communication theory, and social psychology to understand why narrative repetition may serve these various functions. Although we choose to use the term *function*, we are not suggesting that every narrative fits into each function in any rational or normative sense (Hendricks, 1972; Pentland & Feldman, 2007).

Classifying narrative repetition in terms of its various functions is no small task, since narratives are displays of subjectivity (Zellmer, Allen, & Kesseboehmer, 2006), eliciting inherent complexity and equivocality. Upon multiple tellings,

the same story may elicit boredom or it may stimulate different audience members. At different times a repeated narrative may be brief or more elaborate. Events, both large and small, can change the direction of a story. Also, each telling or reading of a story produces another layer of context (Tsoukas & Hatch, 2001). Therefore, individuals are reflexively engaged in developing interpretations and reactions to stories. Bruner observed that stories often begin as partial expressions and we must compare a story’s parts in order to make sense of the whole narrative. As he states, “Since the meanings of the parts of a story are ‘functions’ of the story as a whole, and, at the same time, the story as a whole depends on its formation of appropriate constituent parts, story interpretation seems irretrievably hermeneutic” (Bruner, 2005: 28). Narratives are also responsive to time and space, and, therefore, meanings of a story are not fixed or determined. In other words:

As humans we tell our stories, we attempt to make our narrative meaningful to the listener, to help them see connections and participate. In each telling, the narrative may change as we respond to the reactions of participants. We may draw on other stories as comparisons, embellishments, to situate our narrative in a broader discursive space, or orient the listener by linking our story to theirs (Luhman & Boje, 2001: 166).

The capacity of a narrative to vary in punctuation, pace, and participant composition means that narratives are structurally complex. From a complexity perspective, narrative is contextualized and emergent (Luhman & Boje, 2001).

Because the functions of narrative repetition are situated in time and space, one term cannot adequately capture the flexibility of a narrative. Concepts that are too complex for a single word require a duality (Cooper & Burrell, 1988). Thus, we present the functions of narrative repetition as dualities, which Farjoun defines as “the two-fold character of an object of study without separation,” in which two essential elements are viewed as “interdependent, rather than separate and opposed” (2010: 203). Individuals may repeat narratives over time for different functions, or the same story may contain multiple (even competing) functions.

For example, Mumby (1987) analyzed the story of a lowly security guard, who did not allow the chairman of the board to enter the building because the chairman was not wearing the appro-

appropriate badge. The story simultaneously expresses the duality of control and resistance. The guard is attempting to control the situation by adhering to the rules ("you cannot enter without a badge"), no matter who is disobeying. At the same time, the story shows resistance, since the chairman could easily dismiss the guard and her request because of his stature in the organization ("the rules don't apply to me").

As this example shows, dualities draw attention to the power of anomalies and contradictions (Farjoun, 2010), which are ever-present in narrative. Indeed, in several analyses of narratives, scholars have used dualities to describe the conflicts and tensions found among organizational stories (Chreim, 2005; Martin et al., 1983; Peirano-Vejo & Stablein, 2009). In the present analysis we offer three functions of narrative repetition: control/resistance, differentiation/integration, and stability/change. These three functions are grounded in an underlying thread that runs throughout each duality: sameness and difference. This framework of sameness (which encompasses control, integration, and stability) and difference (which incorporates resistance, differentiation, and change) is an appropriate overarching structure for the functions of narrative repetition, since this theme is common in narrative theory. Ricoeur (1984, 1992), for example, positioned narrative identity as a balance between sameness (*idem*) and difference (*ipse*). The three axes of narrative repetition that we present next all reflect this overarching theme.

### Control/Resistance

**Control.** Organizations can use narrative repetition as a means of control—for example, as a way to convey or reinforce acceptable behavior (e.g., Martin, 1982; Mumby, 1987). As Polster notes, "Stories often guide people in how to live their lives. Sometimes this purpose, clearly intentional, is served by moral or instructional messages" (1987: 38). When certain stories are circulated that carry a "lesson learned," they serve as a form of control. Narratives that circulate throughout an organization are effective methods of control because "they indoctrinate without the subject being aware of being indoctrinated" (Gabriel, 2000: 113).

Many individuals repeat narratives to warn or alarm organizational members in an effort to

control their actions. Gabriel noted, for example, that recounting narratives in the military helps to "maintain a continuous and tangible level of anxiety, which permeates the culture of such organizations" (2000: 53). Stories like these encourage a belief or pattern of behavior. McConkie and Boss found that "sometimes people did in fact do things because the stories had suggested they do so in certain ways—in other words, the stories both prescribed and reinforced certain behaviors" (1986: 197).

For example, in his classic ethnography about the training of surgical residents, Bosk described how horror stories abound in hospitals. Interestingly, he notes, "I have heard different physicians-in-training in different types of hospitals in different geographic regions repeat the same horror stories" (1979: 103). One such tale materialized when

a junior student told the following story that he had heard: A nurse's aide was assigned to watch a woman on a respirator. A patient at the other end of the hall had a cardiac arrest. The aide left the room to see what the commotion was about. The patient on the respirator turned her head and the tube kinked. By the time the nurse's aide returned, the cardiac monitor indicated a stopped heart (1979: 108).

Here stories were shared to teach employees to act (or not act) in a certain way. Likewise, leaders may also recount narratives in an effort to persuade or control business ventures. For instance:

A green CFO reports to his board that he intends to invest the company's free cash to produce some additional income. One board member, an experienced entrepreneur, relates the story of another CFO who proposed to invest his company's cash in a high-yield instrument. The sage on his board responded, "No one will remember the extra 1½% you earned. They will remember the \$10 million you lost" (Swap, Leonard, Shields, & Abrams, 2001: 104).

Similarly, in their research examining storytelling in elite business careers, Maclean, Harvey, and Chia (2012) noted how powerful leaders must (re)frame their accounts to themselves and others. One interviewee, Angus, head of a recruitment company, explicitly stated, "You need a story you can sell" (2012: 29). Leaders construct meaning for others and influence sensemaking toward their own goal (Gabriel, 2000). This aspect of storytelling, referred to as sensegiving, is

crucial to the production of belief (Gioia & Chitipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007).

In one example of sensegiving, Humphreys, Ucbasaran, and Lockett demonstrated how a black jazz musician, Wynton Marsalis, “consciously assumed role of sensegiver by not only inspiring stories but also by selectively (re)telling stories to shape the future of jazz” (2012: 51–52). The authors concluded that “through the selective re-presentation of stories Marsalis seems to be . . . ensuring that jazz is recognized as a black musical art form, and establishing the economic independence of black musicians” (2012: 52). As an inspirational figure, Marsalis used narrative repetition as a mechanism for leadership and organizing.

The “fantasy chain” literature also alludes to the persuasive power of narrative repetition. Whereas balance theories (e.g., Heider, 1958; Newcomb, 1961) suggest that attitudes are changed through dissonance or imbalance, the fantasy chain literature “explains why so much ‘persuasive’ communication simply repeats what the audience already knows” (Bormann, 1972: 399). Storytellers exercise power by framing events in a certain way (Lawrence & Thomas, 1999) and dropping or adding parts of the narrative. As stories are retold, “the plasticity and interpretative flexibility of narratives also makes them particularly well suited to use in political games where individuals and coalitions need often to present information differently to different audiences in order to secure acquiescence and enthusiasm” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005: 174). Thus, individuals use storytelling in organizations to serve their own purposes, and as a result, certain stories become dominant and serve as the norm (Näslund & Perner, 2012).

But another important aspect of the function of control rests on which individuals have the power to share a narrative. Some individuals may have the “rights” to tell a story, whereas others do not (Lawrence & Thomas, 1999). When stories are repeated, only certain individuals are in the know. Narratives may be kept private among entitled members until the story “breaks,” at which point the information becomes part of public knowledge (e.g., a “breaking” news story) or mainstream press (e.g., the reporter “broke” the scandal story). According to Boje, “Part of knowing how to behave in a storytelling organization is knowing who can tell and who can be told a particular story (‘I don’t know

if the corner office would want that story to get around.)’” (1991: 110). Some organizational stories must be kept “in the loop”—that is, only within the circle—of entitled members to ensure that they remain confidential. Certain organizational members may not be told some stories in order to keep the narrative limited to a set audience. When stories leak outside the loop and get appropriated there, they have the potential to change—and to backfire. To maintain control and guard against the leaking of a story, Boje found that organizational members would sometimes shorten the length of stories, even naming stories and then referencing them by code name alone, prohibiting outsiders from detecting the retelling. In the following example, one employee, Sid, shares some insider news that a rival firm is being sold. Sid uses the phrases “word is on the street” and “you know” to reference “the fuller story that the vendors know but do not expect outsiders to know” (1991: 122):

Word is on the street that they are up for sale, OK? So now you know [CEO] may be the president. . . . But somebody’ll buy him next month and then he’s going to be gone because you know, because you know they’re bringing in their own people (1991: 122).

Last, McConkie and Boss’s (1986) research on organizational stories at Concord, an agency that coordinated research requests for the public, illustrates the controlling mechanism of narrative repetition. In the authors’ interviews with employees, nearly 85 percent of organizational members mentioned the “Firing of Elayne” story.<sup>1</sup> The story recalled a staff member, Elayne G., who had been fired in a staff meeting by Mr. Jones. Interestingly, “some of those who reported the story were not hired by Concord until as much as nine months after the firing took

<sup>1</sup> The “Firing of Elayne” was described by one employee as such:

Everybody talks about it. Maybe Elayne wasn’t the best worker here; and sometimes she got herself into fights. A lot of people feel that she was upset because she got passed over for a job she wanted which she says she didn’t even know was advertised so she couldn’t compete. Anyway, in a staff meeting, with the whole staff there (about 100 people) she challenged Mr. D., and he just gave her a cold stare and said, “Elayne, you’re fired!” That was it! No explanation, no nothing! “You’re fired!” We all sat like dumbies [sic], just scared, wondering if we’d be next (McConkie, 1980: 218).

place. In short, it had rippled throughout the organization" (1986: 193). The Firing of Elayne tale epitomizes indirect social control. When researchers asked employees what effect the story had on their behavior (note that employees were allowed to give more than one response), twenty-six of the responses were that the story "warned me not to anger Jones," another seven that the story "made me cautious about who I confronted," and six that the story "made me avoid contact with Jones." The spreading of the narrative through the organization had a powerful effect on employee behavior.

The Firing of Elayne tale functioned as a control mechanism among employees. However, narrative repetition gives stories the power to serve dual purposes simultaneously. Thus, the story also served as a means of resistance for employees.

"I was always afraid," said one rather timid woman, "to say anything bad about Mr. Jones, because I was afraid it might get me in trouble. But somehow, when I heard the story about Elayne and how she got fired, I just needed to talk. And people seemed to understand, and want to talk to me as well." In short, the common shared experience opened an otherwise closed door (McConkie & Boss, 1986: 198).

Aligning with Farjoun's (2010) notion of a duality, control cannot exist without pockets of resistance; the two are interdependent. In Weick's concept of a loosely coupled system, overloading a system at one point causes it to well up and spill over in a contrasting way (Orton & Weick, 1990; Weick, 1974). In the next section we explore the contradictory yet complementary side of control.

**Resistance.** The necessary corollary of control is that of resistance (Foucault, 1977). Resistance and control are "inextricably and simultaneously linked, often in contradictory ways" (Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994: 29). Although certain stories are repeated to influence or exert power, other narratives may function to promote resistance. Indeed, stories feed on differences and destabilize and disturb the order of "reason" (Lyotard, 1984: 61). In proliferating stories of resistance, narratives may counter social norms or organizational power structures. Furthermore, individuals may blatantly oppose the previous narrative or offer resistance more subtly—through cynicism, irony, or ridicule.

Most organizations bear stories of resistance. Kassing (2002) collected employees' accounts of upward dissent and identified "repetition" as a distinct strategy through which employees expressed their disagreement or contradictory opinions. Although Kassing did not focus on narratives in particular, he found that employees would continue "to draw attention to one's dissent across time—either verbally or behaviorally—and often collectively with other employees" (2002: 196). For example, one employee who was seeking a promotion admitted, "I talked about my situation several times" (2002: 198).

Although employees might mention their disagreement or contradictory opinions repeatedly, resistance stories may be difficult for researchers to procure. Tracy (2000) described how cruise staff developed "hidden transcripts"—discourses that occur beyond direct observation of those in power (Scott, 1990)—by repeating stupid questions and what-if stories to make fun of passengers. A resistance narrative may also appear in the form of a rumor (Hafen, 2004), which "is not only an opportunity for anonymous, protected communication, but also serves as a vehicle for anxieties and aspirations that may not be openly acknowledged by its propagators" (Scott, 1990: 145).

For instance, Murphy's research showed that when flight attendants learned their bags would be randomly checked, one said, "I don't know if it is true or not, but I heard there was a flight attendant who was fired just for taking a carton of milk off the airplane," and another flight attendant contended, "I heard there was an entire crew based in Cincinnati fired for taking aspirin and milk off the airplane" (Murphy, 1998: 518). Murphy suggests these stories—clearly examples of narrative repetition—represent a way for employees to "release their frustrations about a dominating policy" (1998: 519). In addition, Murphy notes that by sharing such stories, flight attendants could form strategies to resist bag searching. One employee prudently shared:

My friend, Ann, she was going to state that they could only do that if they suspected her of drugs. If they said that they did, she would say that it was against her wishes and without her permission. That way, if they can't substantiate a drug charge, you could sue them for invasion of privacy. That is how I am going to handle it (1998: 519).

Indeed, hearing stories of how others resisted (or would resist) the organization or its policies may give employees inspiration for opposition. In their research on the counterinstitutional website *RadioShackSucks.com*, Gossett and Kilker (2006) shared former employees' stories of quitting the organization and encouraging fellow "shackers" to explore other job opportunities. The authors found that hearing the same stories over and over had a powerful effect, with several employees claiming that reading about others' experiences motivated them to leave. Namely, one employee wrote, "I would just like to say thank you to all those out there who have continued to encourage me to get off my butt and change my life" (2006: 74).

Organizations may also use oppositional stories strategically—using past stories of resistance to their advantage. Boje (1995) discussed how Michael Eisner, former Disney CEO, recounted one of Walt Disney's stories, which described a boy's desire to march in the circus parade. The moral of the story was to try new things and not to fear failure. Eisner repeated Disney's story at the 1984 stockholders' meeting to persuade shareholders to take a chance and push back on the conservative strategy Disney previously had for the company.

Retelling narratives about failed resistance may also have an effect on organizational members' resistance (or lack thereof). Holmer-Nadesan's research about the identity of women service workers found "five individuals [who] repeated an organizational narrative about a service worker who had taken secretarial skills classes, but had been unable to transfer. For some, this impression led to a sense of hopelessness: 'I feel trapped in the role I am [in]'" (1996: 69). In hearing about another service worker's failed attempt to resist her identity, women felt as if they were stuck in their current position.

Furthermore, narrative repetition may serve the function of resistance when organizations do not want stories retold. For example, "organizations rarely encourage open discussion of issues of sexual harassment and often call for confidentiality when dealing with the complaints" (Clair, 1993: 116). Whistle-blowing is a type of resistance because whistle-blowers repeat stories that the organization does not want disclosed. Importantly, whistle-blowing does not require firsthand knowledge of wrongdoings; in fact, celebrated Enron whistle-blower

Sherron Watkins made allegations "solely on rumors that she heard during the two months she was working in Enron Global Finance" (Hillon, Smith, & Isaacs, 2005: 19). Richardson and McGlynn (2011) examined resistance narratives by exploring whistle-blowing cases in collegiate sports. Among the thirteen cases examined, whistle-blowers had retold stories of organizational wrongdoings, including academic fraud, academic integrity issues, and unsanctioned financial compensation. Richardson and McGlynn found that organizational members who repeated stories of a team's wrongdoings were confronted with isolation, unfavorable labels, and even death threats from rabid sports fans because they resisted the organization's desire for secrecy.

Circulating untruthful information or lies may also exemplify narrative repetition that serves to resist organizational rules or circumvent punishment. In his ethnography of police officers, Van Maanen (1973) described how policemen teach recruits that "nobody's perfect" but to cover up mistakes. For instance, a two-year veteran recounted this story about him and his patrol partner, Grayson:

Grayson had this dolly he'd been balling for quite a while living over on the north side. Well, it seemed like a quiet night so we cruise out of our district and over to the girl's house. I babysit the radio while Grayson goes inside. Wouldn't you know it, we get a emergency call right away. . . . I start honking the horn trying to get the horny bastard out of there; he pays me no mind, but the neighbors get kind of irritated at some cop waking up the nine-to-fivers. . . . Pretty soon Sparky and Jim show up to find out what's happening. They're cool but their Sergeant ain't, so we fabricate this insane story 'bout Sparky's girlfriend living there and how he always toots the horn when passing. . . . Nobody ever found out what happened, but it sure was close (1973: 413).

Stories of resistance are often "risky" and therefore may only be repeated for certain audiences. For example, Lawrence and Thomas (1999) suggest that at IBM a software developer may have to tell a story about a project that goes against upper management's version of the story. In this case the developer may disclose his or her narrative to certain team members but not to upper management. In addition, the authors note that "storytellers also temper risk by attempting to elicit group endorsement of a story they propose to tell, before launching into

the story ("Did you hear what happened to Oscar?") (1999: 2).

### Differentiation/Integration

**Differentiation.** Both organizations and individuals differentiate and sustain a unique identity through narrative. We answer the question "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" through reflexive narrative (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Collectively and apart, people need a coherent story (Czarniawska, 1997).

We form communities through narrative accounts (Carr, 1986; Rappaport, 2000), and "organizations exist to tell their collective stories" (Boje, 1995: 1000). Martin and colleagues (1983) described how all organizations strive toward uniqueness, seeking to distinguish themselves as a different enterprise from other entities.

Individuals create an organization's identity, in part, through "organizational sagas," an expression coined by Clark (1970) to describe a collection of stories about an organization's past. By studying the content of liberal arts college sagas, Clark found commonalities among many institutions' content. Narratives were retold to show the unique qualities of each organization and promote a distinct organizational identity. Clark also found that

the favorable impression created by the saga helped those people to justify their commitment of years, even a lifetime, of time and effort to that particular organization. Thus a collection of stories . . . served to generate commitment to an organization's culture, philosophy, beliefs and/or its policies (quoted in Martin, 1982: 264).

Narrative repetition plays a pivotal role in defining an organization's unique strategy as well. As Barry and Elmes observe:

From a narrative perspective, the successful strategic story may depend less on such tools as comprehensive scanning, objective planning, or meticulous control/feedback systems and more on whether it stands out from other organizational stories, is persuasive, and invokes retelling (1997: 433).

In their theoretical piece, Barry and Elmes share an example of strategic narrative construction, one that centers on a large-scale transformation at a European aluminum producer. The organization was seeking to "lift the company to a new plateau" (Parker, 1990: 14) but

"struggled to find a different way to represent the organization" (Barry & Elmes, 1997: 445). In the end, employees of the company came together to create a strategic narrative. Interestingly, narrative repetition played a key role in the creation and embodiment of the organization's story. Barry and Elmes explain:

Story-telling groups were re-arranged so these stories could be told to different people and in different ways (quite a few stories were converted into songs and skits). Gradually, the repeated tellings seemed to come together in a complex, dialogical way (with many interconnected yet separate tales having been told). The new directions embodied in the overall narrative became touchstones for changes in day-to-day actions (1997: 446).

Sharing and retelling stories enabled the organization to coalesce around a strategic narrative and to emerge as a world leader in its industry.

In addition to distinguishing an organization's identity, narratives that are repeated in organizations also serve to differentiate certain *individuals'* identity in the organization, circulate a particular character, and maintain a person's spirit over time. Such narratives solidify and/or challenge an established role identity in the organization. Individual identity is "formed and maintained through actual or imagined interpersonal agreement about what the self is like" (Schlenker, 1986: 23), which often occurs through repeated stories about the individual. Bruner (2002) goes so far as to claim that "selfhood" only exists because we can tell stories about ourselves.

In organizations, people commonly share stories of identity creation and maintenance about the founder or CEO of the organization. In his research on story performance in organizations, Boje described a story that was repeated in many office conversations:

Doug, in almost his first meeting with the executives, uprooted a "reserved for the CEO" (one was also reserved for each of the VPs) parking sign and threw it on the executive meeting table, demanding to know "who put up this sign? This is not the kind of leadership I will have around here." The offending executive, for this and other good reasons, was fired by week's end. This story made the rounds and reinforced Doug's image as the reformer who would not put up with special privileges for executives. This Doug-as-savior theme resurfaces in stories from vendors and customers (1991: 119).

Similarly, in her study of workplace gossip, Hafen described how an employee of an organization, Eva, "heard many stories, 'mostly very favorable,' about former executives of the company. Her favorite was about a former executive vice president 'who took actions based on comments he heard from a complete stranger on an airplane'" (2004: 232). Even though Eva never met the former VP, she believed that he was a good listener.

In addition to stories about organizational leaders, many narratives are repeated about other unique employees. In his research at an engineering firm, Owen (1987) found that specific "stories were commonly shared among those 'on the benches.' The exploits of 'Serendipity Sam,' a researcher who had accumulated the most 'Golden Fleece' awards, continued the legend of excitement and innovation" (quoted in Deal, 1990: 11). Through this repetition, Sam's identity was created and sustained.

In sum, it is through narrative repetition that organizational and individual identities are institutionally and socially constructed (e.g., Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). We rely on stories for constructing meaning and organizing action (Gioia, 1986). Identities are continually constructed (Gabriel, 1999) to differentiate individuals and organizations. This notion supports an approach to identity that is fluid and fragmented (Brown, 2006; Chreim, 2005), as opposed to perspectives that view identity as stable or enduring (Ashforth & Mael, 1996).

Yet repeated stories can both differentiate and integrate organizational members. In her study of firefighters, Myers notes that newcomers or "booters" felt unique or differentiated, since "each of them had heard stories about how badly other booters were treated, but the real mistreatment always seemed to happen at other stations" (2005: 367). Thus, stories repeated about abuse served to define their station and how it was distinct. But this example also highlights the duality of differentiation and integration; just as retelling stories about maltreatment separated booters from other stations, it integrated them with their current station. In her analysis Myers continues by stating, "Each commented on how lucky he was to be at his particular station, because 'they are really good to me here'" (2005: 367). This illustration shows both "poles" of the differentiation and integration duality. Even though people may repeat a narra-

tive to differentiate their organization, the story simultaneously bonds members of that unit. Differentiation and integration are mutually enabling, because when there is a "they," there is a "we."

**Integration.** Although retold narratives help to create unique identities, they also help to integrate or unite, serving as an organizational glue or bond between members. From the linguistics literature, Norrick (1997) shows that retelling familiar stories serves to foster group rapport and ratify group membership. In one case a family's mother, Pat, describes a party she attended where she retold a family story to her friends. Pat informs her family, "And I told the story about you and the little chipmunk out in the garage" (1997: 205). Norrick notes that even though stories may be retold primarily for amusement, they enhance feelings of a family's unity and bond.

Repetition may integrate foibles as well. In an organizational context, new members of Alcoholics Anonymous are brought into the group by building on stories:

One speaker follows another by picking out certain pieces of what has been said, saying why it was relevant to him, and elaborating on it with some episode of his own. . . . Other speakers will take the appropriate parts of the newcomer's comments, and build on this in their own comments, giving parallel accounts with different interpretations . . . or expanding on parts of their own stories which are similar to parts of the newcomer's stories, while ignoring the inappropriate parts of the newcomer's story (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 83).

By giving parallel accounts of a general story, AA participants repeat shared narratives, thus uniting members. In this way narrative repetition helps incorporate individuals into the group by referencing and building on members' commonalities.

Moreover, stories allow individuals to be integrated as organizational members. Through socialization, organizations teach members "the ropes" and assimilate newcomers into the organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). As members move through the stages of socialization—anticipatory, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit (to use Jablin's [1987, 2001] terms)—stories act as a form of sensemaking for both newcomers and incumbents (Brown, 1985; Weick & Roberts, 1993). In writing about the importance of stories in organizational settings, Martin notes,

"Such stories are told to new employees—informally during breaks and formally in training programs and speeches—to explain 'how things are done around here'" (1982: 256). Importantly, narratives are repeated to new members to give them a sense of the organization's history and culture. Furthermore, Siehl and Martin (1982) assessed sales trainees' knowledge of four narratives and found that corporate values and norms are learned rapidly through organizational stories. Wilkins (1984) also demonstrated how managers use narrative to inform employees about their preferred organizational cultures.

Stohl's (1986) research on memorable messages—communicative events that have a major influence on an individual and are thus remembered for a long period of time—shows the importance of narrative repetition in the socialization process. Interestingly, employees often pass their memorable story on to someone else in the organization, which shows how these messages socialize the individual and resocialize tenured organizational members as well. For example, Deal's research on educational leadership demonstrates the value of narrative repetition in integrating teachers—both new and old:

Anita McCarthy, principal of Todd Elementary School in Briar Cliff, New York, convenes a "boot camp" each year before the opening of school. In this Mentor Program, seasoned veterans spend half a day with novice teachers to retell stories of the past. . . . These events bond newcomers to traditions of the school. Even more important, older teachers are given an opportunity to renew their own commitment (1990: 7).

In addition to socializing employees in the company, narrative repetition may help individuals who are not even members of the organization feel part of its culture, since stories that are repeated about an organization allow individuals outside the organization to imagine what organizational life is like. In this way narrative repetition serves as a form of anticipatory socialization—the process of learning about certain occupations, both directly and indirectly, as well as forming expectations about organizations (Feldman, 1976; Jablin, 1987, 2001; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

In Gibson and Papa's (2000) study of anticipatory socialization in blue collar work, several participants discussed how they learned about

Industry International, a manufacturing organization, through stories from family and friends. As one employee, Chuck, recalled, "I listened to my relatives talk about working at Industry International all the time. Our friends and family all worked there too" (2000: 78). Through their analysis, the authors explain that during the process of organizational socialization, certain individuals undergo "organizational osmosis," absorbing and adopting the organization's culture. John, for example, recalled being indoctrinated into Industry International during dinner table conversations:

The whole time I was growing up, I used to sit at the kitchen table and listen to my relatives talk about Industry International. I knew all about the piece-rate system and how it works. I kinda' understood what it was like to work in a factory even before I got there. When I finally got a job at Industry International, hell, it was like a family picnic. I already knew most of the guys I would be working with and I had already been told about what to do and what not to do by listening to my relatives talk all the time (2000: 79).

By being exposed to narrative repetition outside of the organization, individuals can become integrated into the company even before they begin working there.

### Stability/Change

**Stability.** Narrative repetition also functions to keep the organization and its members consistent over time. Repeated stories anchor the organization so that it is not likely to change or fail, since such rhetoric helps affirm and maintain publicly shared values (Hart, 1984). Narratives shape the perception of invariability, for "stories often provide the vehicle for stability construction and maintenance because they are flexible carriers of meaning" (Peirano-Vejo & Stablein, 2009: 445). Institutions rely on the action of individuals and organizations—such as the telling of stories—for their reproduction over time (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Narratives are easily reproducible, durable, and communicable—the three qualities that "shape the way in which rationalized patterns are established, and how they spread and become embedded across different instrumental contexts" (Hasselbladh & Kallinikos, 2000: 711).

Stories create stability in organizations by serving as a template for future action, remind-

ing us of paths to take and avoid (Stone, 1988). For example, Patriotta's (2003) research revealed teams on the Mirafiori shop floor who resolve disruptive occurrences in the plant through "detective stories." In these stories team members reproduce the problem through fiction "in order to reconstruct the dynamic of the incident. . . . eventually, solutions are elaborated (most of the time drawing on the repertoire of similar past cases, and sometimes creating new knowledge) and sooner or later the problem is solved" (2003: 362–369). This repetition suggests that the organization is heedful of organizational breakdowns or interruptions, and team members strive to maintain stability in the plant. Patriotta noted that emblematic episodes are remembered and used as templates for the solution to future problems. In addition to telling how a single incident was resolved, retellings provide a blueprint "to predict future organizational behavior—one's own behavior as well as the behavior of other employees" (Martin, 1982: 287).

In his detailed ethnographic studies of service technicians, Orr (1990) noted a similar phenomenon. When technicians encounter a problem with a machine, they tell stories to reflect on memories of failed machines, tests that have been run in the past, and the machine's responses to prior solutions. In one instance this storytelling process was "a five-hour effort . . . [and] yielded a dozen anecdotes told during the trouble shooting, taking a variety of forms and serving a variety of purposes" (1990: 10). Over time, the storytelling provides insights to diagnosis and repair. Importantly, technician reps recycle and repeat these stories. As Brown and Duguid note:

Such stories are passed around, becoming part of the repertoire available to all reps. Orr reports hearing a concise, assimilated version of this particular false error code passed among reps over a game of cribbage in the lunch room three months later. . . . A story, once in the possession of the community, can then be used—and further modified—in similar diagnostic sessions (1991: 44).

Jordan (1989) also offers a useful example of stories that are retold in the moment to solve problems and maintain order. In midwifery, stories of similar cases or issues are often recounted among attendants as a guide for how to proceed in a birth:

When a woman is making little progress in her labor, one of her attendants may tell the story of one of her own births where she had similar trouble and solved it by moving from her hammock to a chair. Others may agree, or tell stories of a different sort, for example, how in the labor of some other woman spoonfuls of a special honey (from indigenous bees) solved the problem (1989: 935).

Here narrative repetition serves as an "information-packaging function" (Jordan, 1989: 935) to preserve organizational functioning and ensure that the baby is delivered.

These examples demonstrate that repeated stories may serve as a benchmark for action during a crisis (Neustadt & May, 1986). Boje notes that in a turbulent environment, "when a decision is at hand, the old stories are recounted and compared to unfolding story lines . . . to invite the repetition of past successes" (1991: 106). By taking into account how an issue has been addressed in the past, organizations can use these stories to maintain stability.

In addition to binding an organization to its past, repeated narratives also create a fixed course for a company's future. Moreover, Feldman's (2003) research on budget routines in a university housing division shows how narratives may keep an organization from changing. The study takes a performative perspective toward routines, proposing a recursive relationship between understandings and performances. Feldman defines performances as "actions that are signified in that they are known to others in the organization. People have picked them out of the stream of ongoing actions and communicated about them" (2003: 729). From these performances, organizational members gain an understanding of how the organization operates, and employees determine what actions make up a specific routine. In the study Feldman found that members relied on past and reproduced performances, which inhibited new routines and organizational change. Interestingly, though, Feldman takes a structural approach and argues that performances both constrain and enable routines. Thus, "the mechanisms of change and the mechanisms of stability are the same" (2003: 729), highlighting the duality between stability and change.

Furthermore, the stability/change duality is present in Chreim's (2005) research, which describes how a Canadian bank's identity shifted over time, from an old, traditional, and conser-

vative bank to a modern and innovative organization. Yet during this change, there was continuity in the words that people used to describe the bank. The labels remained, yet their meaning changed over time. For example, the "first" label was used throughout senior managers' narratives, but shifted from signifying the bank as old ("We were the first bank in Canada") to innovative ("We continued to set the pace for the Canadian industry with our newest first, continent-wide banking"; 2005: 576). Chreim describes the presence of both stability and change in narratives as "confluence." Just like when two rivers merge and the waters of one stream meet the waters of another, confluence describes the state of the two flowing together in harmony.

Scholars have also conceptualized the process of organizing as a balancing act between stability and change. This view acknowledges that organizations are shifting social realities; change is the typical state of organized life, and any sense of continuity is hard to achieve (Peirano-Vejo & Stablein, 2009; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). In analyzing stories about change in a farming organization, Peirano-Vejo and Stablein (2009) identified five conflicting issues in which the duality of stability and change was present. For example, the authors demonstrated the tension between past (stability) and future (change) through an institutional video, where the narrator intermingles past and future tenses and "stories are told and retold in ways that go back and forth communicating the message that stability and change can co-exist" (2009: 451).

**Change.** In reviewing narratives throughout the literature, we have found that the most work has been done on change. Narrative repetition can effectively disseminate change, because when a story is told that resonates with the listener, people get behind the idea and join in spreading the story (Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005). Stories can circulate fast throughout an organization's social fabric, which makes narrative repetition a useful mechanism in organizational change efforts. Stories can be used as a "deliberate tool for strategy formation and development," for they give people a picture of the future to rally behind (Rasmussen, 2005: 229).

Organizations often strategically introduce stories to induce change. Dunford and Jones (2000) investigated recurring narratives from managers when they were communicating stra-

tegic changes. The authors found, for instance, that managers repeatedly encouraged employees to take personal responsibility. At an annual retreat one manager told a story about a scene from the movie *Patton*, which resonated with employees and sparked change:

There's a scene in the movie where they're advancing on Germany . . . and Patton jumps in a jeep, goes to the front line and says, "What's holding this column up? Get moving!" They say, "We can't" and there is this French peasant on this bridge, with this sort of cart and these two donkeys which won't move, and Patton saying, "You're meaning to tell me my men are being shot, my equipment is being blasted out of the air because these donkeys won't move!" He pulls out his guns and he shoots the donkeys. . . . This theme has just swept like wildfire and we've got this email sort of thing and hardly a week goes by without somebody saying, "I shot the donkey!" (2000: 1219).

Furthermore, a powerful example of narrative repetition being used for the purpose of change comes from McConkie and Boss's (1986) study of stories at Concord. In addition to the Firing of Elayne story previously mentioned as an example of control/resistance, the authors discuss another story that was promulgated to engender change at Concord. Specifically, Concord chose two members to write a story that would serve as a model to improve Concord employee behavior. According to McConkie and Boss's research, Concord's CEO then asked that copies of the story, which the employees had titled "The Parable of Happy Employee,"<sup>2</sup> be distributed to

<sup>2</sup> The "Parable of the Happy Employee":

Happy Employee, undaunted by economic tough times and the unfriendly receptions of Employment Directors throughout the land, finally secured a much-desired interview with a Department Head at Concord. Following the interview, the Department Head introduced Happy to the Director, who also interviewed him, and concurred in the Department Head's decision to hire Happy. Once hired, Happy was assigned a "big brother" (female employees receive "big sisters") who guided Happy through the first few months at Concord. Meanwhile, the Department Head joined with appropriate personnel to see that Happy received an orientation about Concord and developed a calendar, which specified dates upon which Happy and the Department Head, every other week for two weeks, would review Happy's progress. Happy set goals with his Department Head, the substance of which was reflected in organizational goals, and which were appraised on a periodic basis (McConkie, 1980: 219).

staff members. The artificial narrative was then spread throughout the organization, which facilitated cultural and behavioral changes at Concord:

It was not long until copies of the "Parable" began to crop up all over the organization—pinned to bulletin boards, taped to windows and desks, on walls and doors, and, in one case, on the doors of the elevator. The question "Are you happy?" became a standard part of performance interviews and was a way of asking not only "How are you?" but also if one felt that he or she was being treated the way a "Happy Employee" should have been treated (McConkie & Boss, 1986: 194).

In this example management effectively used narrative repetition as a strategy to foster change in the organization.

Besides being utilized at the managerial level, narrative repetition serves to promote change at the organizational level. For example, in order to reform a school in Fairfax County, Virginia, the district created a historical video, which included stories, photos, and testimonies of the school's development from its early origins to the present day. Through "watching children walking through mud to attend a one-room school and hearing an older teacher describe how she often got down on her hands and knees to wash and oil the classroom floor," teachers and administrators were able to draw from historic educational practices to renew and change the spirit of their school system (Deal, 1990: 7).

Also at a macro level, Leonardi and Jackson's (2004) research demonstrates how organizational leaders at Qwest drew on discourse that was already popular in their industry—specifically, narratives of technological determinism, which positioned that technology causes change. The authors noted this as an example of "appropriated stories," in which master social narratives are strategically used for organizational objectives, such as change. For Qwest, the story of technological determinism aided the organization in positioning IT implementation as an inevitable change.

In this case, stories from other organizations were repeated as mechanisms of change. Similarly, narrative repetition can aid in change because stories that are repeated over time can serve as an example for organizations. When stories from other organizations are retold, they are used as models—the "same old story"—to guide organizational change. Doug, for exam-

ple, reminds his colleagues of parallel companies in a meeting about the strategic shift in the focus of his firm:

Looking at acquisitions and mergers in our industry, and I've been through four or five of 'em, disaster hits. And I'll give you examples of Gamma Corporation. I was with the old Delphi Company and it's nonexistent today. They merged with Alpha. And then they merged with Parrot. All the same ownership and so on. Clearly the sales force was on overload. Couldn't handle it and a lot of things fell through the cracks. I can give you similar examples with Juindon. I can go right down the list (Boje, 1991: 118).

This repeated story (and the claim that many similar stories could be told) functions to foster change. Organizations draw from others' experiences and learn from their actions through narrative repetition: "When this company did 'A,' 'B' occurred and the output was 'C,' and 'C' is different from 'A'" (Brown, Denning, Groh, & Prusak, 2005: 47–48). In the same way that babies develop faster if they have siblings to learn from, organizations can also learn by example. Repeated stories can shape organizational development and change efforts.

But even when strategic narratives are disseminated, "the success of a strategic story may depend less on such tools as environmental analysis and strategic planning than on whether it is an engaging, compelling account that encourages the actions desired by the authors of the narrative" (Dunford & Jones, 2000: 1209). This may explain why stories may also have a negative influence on organizational change (Feldman, 1990). Because individuals make sense of stories in a multitude of ways, there are a number of different interpretations of a change narrative (Näslund & Perner, 2012). For example, in their study of a merger, Brown and Humphreys (2003) found that organizational members developed multiple (and different epic/tragic) stories and understandings of the change. This finding may be of particular importance for stories of change that are repeated to multiple organizational audiences (employees, stakeholders, etc.) over time.

## DISCUSSION

In this article we present a framework to account for the complex functions that narrative repetition may serve in the process of organiz-

ing. We propose three functions of narrative repetition, which are best represented as dualities: control/resistance, differentiation/integration, and stability/change. Just as Boje supported a "theory of organization as a collective storytelling system" (1991: 106), we append that collective storytelling systems often recirculate narratives, which promote various organizational functions. This conceptual piece generates additional insight into the topic of narrative by focusing on stories that are repeated in organizations, which we believe adds to theory in several ways.

Narrative repetition contributes to management and narrative theory by explaining the process by which the meaning of stories shifts and how multiple meanings may simultaneously exist. When two organizational members hear the same story, one may interpret a narrative of stability, whereas the other may hear a hint of change. As such, narrative repetition may uniquely explain how stories are contested and changed over time. Memories or understandings of events, people, and organizations can be shifted by the simple act of repetition. Narrative repetition explains why the "same" story may have various interpretations, details, and effects. Meanings vary through retellings because an individual may share a story for one purpose but the listener derives a different meaning. As described by Näslund and Perner, "The processes of storytelling and sensemaking are by nature iterative and recursive, assigning meaning to concepts that are then used for further sensemaking and storytelling" (2012: 92). Because of the recursive and interpretive nature of narrative, dualities are likely to overlap, and narratives may serve not only contradictory but simultaneous functions. Indeed, many of the narratives discussed in this article tell stories that serve multiple functions. Different dualities may be present or absent depending on the storyteller's and listener's interpretation of the narrative. Much like Boje's (1995) piece on the play *Tamara*, every telling of narrative is potentially different. Because of the organic nature of stories, there exists plurivocality or the opportunity for multiple understandings. One listener might only interpret a narrative as differentiating, whereas another listener may construe the story as functioning to differentiate and control.

Despite various possible interpretations, we contend that all narrative repetition may be un-

derstood by these three functions and the broader category of sameness and difference. For example, many medical narratives offer a restitution function (things will get better) or a disintegration function (this is our last option). Instead of adding another duality (for this function or others), restitution may be seen as a return to sameness or stability, whereas disintegration marks a path of difference, uncertainty, and a marked change in course. Therefore, we maintain that these three dualities serve as the primary framework for narrative repetition.

Narrative repetition also adds to management and narrative theory by helping capture the complexity embedded in narrative. We propose these functions as dualities because "contradictory aspects of the issue are inevitably present and are simultaneously desirable and undesirable" (Martin et al., 1983). The "poles" of each duality are interdependent and mutually enabling. Whereas scholars frequently examine the stability/change duality (Chreim, 2005; Farjoun, 2010; Peirano-Vejo & Stablein, 2009), they rarely discuss the other two dualities. Of little surprise, resistance narratives are underrepresented in the literature compared to control narratives.

Because it helps capture the complexity of stories and the dualities inherent in storytelling, narrative repetition may add to the related literature on organizational gossip. Scholars acknowledge the complex nature of gossip because it serves a variety of functions (e.g., influence, entertainment, integration, and power) at both the individual and group level (Kniffin & Wilson, 2010; Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Yet because of its complexity, management research surrounding gossip is scant (Kurland & Pelled, 2000; Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Narrative repetition may extend theory and research about gossip by helping to account for its complexity, since the dualities presented here may offer another lens through which to view organizational gossip. Although not all gossip may be considered narrative repetition (not all gossip consists of repeated stories), gossip and retellings are implicitly related because gossip gains momentum when it is passed on or repeated to others (Houmanfar & Johnson, 2004; Michelson & Mouly, 2002). Exploring gossip from the perspective of narrative repetition may uniquely contribute to

the literature by explaining how gossip spreads while serving multiple functions.

Narrative repetition can also contribute to the development of core theoretical concepts in management and organization studies, such as identity, legitimacy, leadership, or resistance. As a case in point, consider Glynn's (2000) fieldwork at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, which describes how one organizational crisis—the 1996 musicians' strike—was the result of latent rifts between the socially constructed identities of musicians and administrators. In her research Glynn (2000: 288) explains how the conflicting organizational identities of artistry ("a world class orchestra in a world class city") versus utility ("the best orchestra we can afford") had a significant effect on the perceptions of the orchestra's core competencies. Although this qualitative field study did not formally address narrative, one could imagine how narrative repetition could help account for the complexity of organizational identity at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. In organizations with hybrid identities, "whose identity is composed of two or more types that would not normally be expected to go together" (Albert & Whetten, 1985: 270), scholars could collect and analyze the dual functions of repeated stories in the organization.

Beyond this example, narrative repetition contributes to the field of management in several other ways. Scholars have expressed a growing interest in the use of narrative in organizational research (e.g., Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). Barbara Czarniawska (1998, 1999) has been at the forefront of advocating for a narrative approach in organization studies and social sciences, promoting the idea that scholars can watch and collect stories in practice, interpret and analyze those narratives, and then put together their own stories in the field of management research. Narrative is a powerful approach to studying organizations because stories capture the complexity of organizational life and behavior. Just as organizational narrative has become a useful way of knowing and understanding organizations, narrative repetition may also be a valuable approach for management research.

In addition to adding to the work in management, narrative repetition can change the practice of narrative research. There has been a great deal of work on what we refer to as direct storytelling or mimesis in organizations. But there has been scant theoretical development

about retelling or narrative repetition as defined here. What happens when a story is recalled from another narrative that one has heard? Organizations are teeming with instances of narrative repetition. Yet scholars often regard instances of repetition as an indication of saturation in qualitative research. Future research should start to view recurring stories as a starting point for a new line of research rather than the end point of data collection. This major shift could highlight the complexity, richness, and distinctiveness of narrative research.

### Implications for Future Research

Seventeen years ago Barry and Elmes (1997) forecasted that changes to organizations (becoming more lean, flat, virtual, etc.) would necessitate new forms of narrative theory in the future. The authors noted that shifts in organizations

will require narratives that can cope with blurred organizational boundaries (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992), dispersed intelligibilities, diverse realities, disrupted chains of authority, and erosion of organizational autonomy (Gergen, 1995: 524–526). Singular readings of strategic narratives, where model readers arrive at like interpretations, will increasingly be a thing of the past. . . . the growing preponderance of "encounter"-based organizations . . . [with] short-term, one-time encounters, will necessitate narrative structures that can adapt to rapidly changing discourses and varied readers (1997: 442).

Indeed, narrative provided a lens into explaining changes to organizational structures over time. But narrative research does not fully account for these intricacies. With this conceptual piece in hand, management and narrative scholars have a new tool to explain the complexities of organizations and their behavior.

We believe we have merely scratched the surface of what will be a multifaceted area of inquiry. Narrative repetition has implications for future research in its use both as a concept and as a methodology.

As a theoretical concept, narrative repetition may be used as a way to explain stories that have different (or multiple) meanings across time and place. Variables such as the role of the narrator, context, audience, length, and frequency of repetition are noteworthy constructs to measure in instances of narrative repetition. In future work scholars must seek to understand

repeated stories that serve more than one function simultaneously. Taking into account the dualities and overlapping nature of functions, scholars should consider which functions work in tandem or "hang together" (to borrow a statistical term from factor analysis) and then investigate the organizational implications of these dualities.

Organizations are rife with examples of narrative repetition. Here we drew only on published academic studies that explicitly stated the recurrence of a story. Additional research should collect new narratives to validate the functions found here. We expect that these dualities of narrative repetition are conceptually applicable to different organizations and additional data. Future research, however, can strengthen these findings.

Furthermore, additional research might explore how stories are repeated in other media. Is the effect of repetition dependent on the medium used? What is the influence of technology on narrative repetition? Particularly with social media, it is contemporary practice to repeat and circulate narratives. For example, organizations share their own company stories or draw attention to others' commentary by sharing links and pictures on Facebook. Twitter also enables narrative repetition through social media, since organizations can quickly "retweet" or repost others' stories. In addition, organizations are crafting stories to spread virally throughout social media, particularly in the form of videos on YouTube. Scholars should explore the impacts of social media on narrative repetition.

Other technologies have helped the spread of stories, too. Smartphones, with functionalities such as mass texts, pictures, and email, allow individuals to pass around information quickly and easily. Individuals are increasingly receiving forwarded messages or sharing stories through information technologies, particularly in organizations, where "we don't want to intrude on each other [face to face], so instead we constantly intrude on each other [through different technologies], but not in 'real time'" (Turkle, 2011: 447). Future work should investigate the extent to which the facility for dissemination makes the repetition of narratives more powerful. On the other hand, research may explore how the capacity to instantly retell narratives dilutes the significance placed on individual stories.

Last, narrative repetition has taken form in contemporary practice through organizations that solicit stories from customers or fans. Lifetime Fitness, for example, wants to hear members' weight loss success stories. By sharing personal stories with Aria Resort & Casino, individuals can win a free trip to Las Vegas. Kraft Singles "Put Your Love on the Map" giveaway invites consumers to tell a story about grilled cheese sandwiches. Even anti-bullying campaigns, such as "I Choose," ask children to recount their stories of being tormented. In various organizations and industries, these stories help provide fuel for organizational initiatives. Additional research should investigate the implications these retellings have on organizational identity, strategy, or consumer behavior.

In all of these contexts, studies could shed light on interesting questions this conceptual piece raises. What factors influence repetition? What types of narrative are repeated? What are the communication patterns for repeated narratives? How are narratives altered, and why, during their repetition? When do stories fail to travel and why? The position that stories are repeated by others multiple times offers a counterposition to Boje's antenarrative (2011), which builds the idea that a story has an uncertain beginning that the speaker "antes" into consideration. In contrast, the repeated narrative builds on an existing story and takes advantage of that telling, even if for different purposes and with an altered emphasis than the original telling. Such evolved tellings, by whom and with what effect, are a central issue in narrative repetition.

Finally, in addition to implications for future research as a concept, narrative repetition also has implications for implementation as a methodology. As a method, narrative repetition may be used as a way to conduct organizational research. In narrative methodology, stories become an object of study, and the researcher focuses on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions surrounding them. In using narrative repetition as a method, scholars may use the recurrence of a story as a starting point for inquiry. An excellent example of repetition used as part of the methodology is Whelan and colleagues' effort (2010) to develop the changing nature of a repeated story by tracing a disgruntled parent and the teacher and principal in a school system. As the authors trace the

story, they show how it changes over retellings, especially for the teacher as the original point of conflict in the story. By using narrative repetition as a mode of interpretation, we may better capture how stories create and reproduce dualities.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we reflect on the power of the stories gathered to represent the conceptual ideas in this article. Because narratives are often so interesting—both in their initial and in their repeated telling—stories are retold in organizations. Whether it be the story of attending an AA meeting that changes a life, launching a new product, cautioning someone about the importance of following the rules, or leaking an organization's wrongdoing, people tend to tune in. And, as March and Olsen (1976) remind us, with attention being a scarce resource in organizations, retelling a story is one way of garnering it.

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