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Patterns of Stories of Organisational Change

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper investigates three patterns of stories employed by organisational actors to make sense of organisational change: (1) stories of 'the good old days', (2) stories of deception, taboo and silence, and (3) stories of influence. Each pattern reflects one way in which organisational actors make sense of change and in which they use their stories for different purposes. This argument is illustrated by short evocative stories from the original data.

Approach: This paper derives from qualitative and inductive cross-national research into organisational change and learning. Three manufacturing firms, one each from the UK, South Africa and Russia, were studied to investigate sensemaking under conditions of change. Data were collected through narrative interviews and interpreted using an inductive approach borrowing elements from grounded theory and analytic induction.

Findings: Personal accounts of experiences with organisational change (change stories) have a dual purpose. On the one hand, they are powerful sensemaking devices with which organisational actors make organisational change meaningful. On the other hand, they contest official change stories, reflecting the complex dynamics of organisational change in patterns of stories. The conclusion is that the experiences and agendas of different organisational actors shape the interests and actions of people in organisations with decisive implications for patterns of organisational change.

Research implications: Organisational change as a multi-story process needs to be investigated through further qualitative and contextual research to provide richer insights into the dynamics of storytelling and sensemaking under conditions of organisational change.

Originality / value: Cross-national study that builds on case and cross-case analysis of autobiographical stories of experiences with organisational change.

Key words: organisational change, sensemaking, story

Classification: research paper

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Patterns of Stories of Organisational Change

Introduction

The study of organisational change through stories is receiving much attention (Rhodes and Brown, 2005) with particular interest in sensemaking under conditions of change (Brown and Humphreys, 2003), the management of change (Barrett et al. 1995; Butcher and Aktinson, 2001), and the analysis of change stories (Sköldberg, 1994; Stevenson and Greenberg, 1998). There is widespread agreement that organisational change is fruitfully understood through narrative, i.e. 'events and happenings that are configured into a temporal unit by means of a plot' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5). Traditional studies have focused on singular accounts of change (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007), and this lack of plurality and multi-vocality is increasingly seen as problematic (Boje, 1994; Dawson 2003). A multi-story view of change (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007) 'opens space for a discussion of motives and purposes, power and domination, aspirations and follies, vanity and self-doubt, ambiguity and polyphony' (Tsoukas, 2005, p. 102) and allows for muted and marginalised voices of change to be heard (Sturdy and Grey, 2003).

Hence, more attention is being drawn to patterns of stories that reflect the negotiation of meaning (sensemaking) under conditions of change (Balogun and Johnson, 2005; Currie and Brown, 2003). Such usually contested accounts enable scholars 'to examine perceptions that are often filtered, denied, or not in subjects' consciousness' (Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993, p. 1394). Drawing on Lyotard, Browning (1992, p. 296), outlines that 'stories feed on differences – different points of view, different needs, different experiences, different friendship networks, and different attributes of responsibility'. An examination of the interaction of such stories provides richer insights into the shadow-side of organisational change. This empirical paper focuses on contested change stories by examining three specific patterns: (1) stories of 'the good old days', (2) stories of deception, taboo and silence, and (3) stories of influence. It derives from three case studies, in which these patterns prevailed and which will be introduced later. The conceptualisation of organisational change as the narrative process of sensemaking is particularly fruitful (Balogun and Johnson, 2005) as 'stories, written and oral, may be regarded as explicit attempts by individuals and groups to make sense of what are often complicated sets of events with uncertain long-term consequences' (Brown, 2005, p. 1581). Such stories, albeit often fragmented and incomplete, are sensemaking attempts that highlight different ways in which organisational actors contest official change accounts based on their experiences and perceptions (Reissner, 2008); they are therefore central to understanding organisational change.

This paper consists of four main parts: (1) a review of the literature on organisational change, narrative/story and sensemaking; (2) an explanation of the methodology and methods; (3) a discussion of the three patterns of change stories, illustrated by short evocative stories from the original data; and (4) a discussion of the research findings. The conclusion is two-fold: firstly, organisational change stories serve multiple purposes and secondly, contested change stories aid the understanding of the experiences, agendas and actions from which patterns and contradictions of change emerge.

Change, Stories and Making Sense

Organisational change becomes meaningful to its participants through stories (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007), i.e. 'communications about personal experience told in everyday discourse' (Browning, 1992, p. 285). They aid organisational actors both in making sense of change and contesting it (Gabriel, 2004a), and therefore both shared interpretations of change and contested change stories are integral to managing change. The latter are often marginalised because they can express 'stealth, secrecy and subversion' (Butcher and Atkinson, 2001, p. 554) or dwell on 'the good old days' (Gabriel, 1993). However, they are a key part of the organisational actors' reality (Reissner, 2008) and help them to legitimise their views about change (Currie and Brown, 2003).

Sensemaking, a narrative interpretive process by which organisational actors attribute meaning to unknown or unexpected events (Brown, 2000; Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995), is a fundamental way of dealing with the contradiction between expectation and experience caused by organisational change (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2004). It enables organisational actors to exchange their experiences and interpretations of such events. Organisational change, which at an impersonal level can be seen as 'a process by which an organizational entity alters its form, state, or function over time' (Stevenson and Greenberg, 1998, p. 742), often confronts organisational actors with a range of unknown or unexpected events, which challenge established frames of reference and evoke uncertainty, ambiguity and fear (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Søderberg (2003, p. 6) explains that 'members of an organization make sense of processes or activities in the organization by fitting them into an interpretive scheme or system of meaning that has developed through experience and socialization. When the organization is altered in some drastic way … members often find that their existing interpreting schemes or frames of reference no longer suffice to make sense of the situation'. Organisational actors will therefore engage in sensemaking to construct new and more meaningful frames of reference through storytelling (Reissner, 2008; Bartunek, 1984; Bruner, 1986). This process is influenced by the values and norms prevalent in the organisation culture of the organisation and the society in which it operates.

However, sensemaking is subject to distortion (Brown, 2000) as 'interpretations are mediated by their existing context of action, ways of thinking, and interactions with others' (Balogun and Johnson, 2005, p. 1574). Hence, sensemaking and its accompanying stories reflect alternative and contested interpretations of change (Gabriel, 2004a). One example is the sense of loss often experienced by organisational actors in times of change (Pelzer, 2004), which is captured in nostalgic stories. Nostalgia is a prominent feature in organisations (Gabriel, 1993) as organisational actors compare their current experiences with past ones, representing the past in an idealised and selective manner. Nostalgia also helps to maintain a sense of continuity (Brown and Humphreys, 2002) and to keep previous frames of reference alive, thus providing an antidote to change. The nostalgic stories prevalent among long-term members of an organisation contradict a more progressive and future-orientated picture that management often wish to portray.

Making sense of organisational change unfolds through different stages (e.g. Isabella, 1990). The announcement of organisational change often challenges taken-for-granted meanings in the organisation's culture, thus leading to a temporary phase of meaninglessness (Bartunek, 1984), and organisational actors will exchange stories to make sense of the new situation (Reissner, 2008). A multitude of stories will circulate in the organisation, many of them contested, thus reflecting different frames of meaning and ways of constructing new realities. To reduce feelings of uncertainty and anxiety, organisational actors will also draw on familiar concepts and ideas (Bean and Eisenberg, 2006), which will increase their story-work, i.e. 'the transformation of everyday experience into meaningful stories' (Gabriel, 2000, p. 41). The number and type of contested stories will increase, 'pick[ing] up minor grunts and groans as [people] respond to their situation' (Goffman, 1989:125). They can also act as a safety valve to release frustration and tension that may have built up in the process of change (Jones, 1991) or be used to exercise influence and power (Currie and Brown, 2003; Gioia et al., 1994). Such contested accounts are usually ante-narratives, i.e. fragmented and temporary stories (Boje, 2001), many of which will be discarded in the further process as new meanings emerge through discussion. The change stories prevailing in an organisation will become more uniform over time (Reissner, 2008) through convergence of sensemaking and sense-giving (Dunford and Jones, 2000) and constitute part of an organisation's culture. The complexity of organisational change is appreciated by the multitude of change stories (Vaara, 2002) and its effects on organisational actors. This process has been likened to painting a picture by a group of organisational actors, each of whom reads the situation differently and adds their perspective to the pool of interpretations (Reissner, 2008). Different stories will thus be 'variously appropriated, discounted, championed and defended' (Barry and Elmes,

1997, p. 432), reflect power dynamics within an organisation (Boje et al., 1999) and serve as a means of social control (McConkie and Boss, 1986).

Making sense of change is often beyond the control of managers, and the dynamics of how stories interact remains ill understood. As 'meaning is fluid and contextual' (Riessmann, 1993, p. 15), making sense of change is best seen as an open-ended process in which most change stories will remain temporary and incomplete (Doolin, 2003 drawing on Law). Since change is context-bound it is vital to relate different types of stories to different contexts in which organisations function. Comparative studies are essential here to vary the contexts in which organisational change and its meaning are understood.

Methodology

This three-year qualitative and inductive research sought to investigate how organisational actors make sense of change through stories. The study was comparative across nations and included three case studies, one each from the United Kingdom (Engineering Ltd.), South Africa (Steel Corp.) and Russia (Northern Steel)[i]. These organisations have successfully gone through major organisational change, involving a substantial increase in the complexity of their products and production methods (Engineering Ltd.), substantial changes to the organisation's size and profitability (Steel Corp.) and substantial changes to the organisation's culture and way of working (Northern Steel). Each organisation's success has been verified and constituted by third party perceptions: at Engineering Ltd. through awards of excellence, and in the case of Steel Corp. and Northern Steel through a marked improvement in their position in world-wide rankings of steel producers. These organisations were selected to enable wider lessons to be learned from the way in which they went successfully through major organisational change and the way in which organisational actors made sense of it.

I employed a narrative approach, which refers to 'any study that uses or analyzes narrative materials' (Lieblich et al., 1998, p. 2), building on the assumptions that stories have ontological significance (Smircich and Morgan, 1982) and allow for the gathering of rich and contextual data that aid theory building (Mintzberg, 1979). In narrative research, researchers use the same materials as the research participants when interpreting change at the workplace (Pentland, 1999); this enables researchers to tap into sensemaking within an organisation (Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993). Researching and reporting contested accounts of change allows for the investigation of pluralistic accounts of change, and researchers will assume the paradoxical dual role of a stranger (Levine, 1971). A stranger is somebody who joins a social setting and becomes an insider for a limited period of time. However, the stranger remains an

outsider because s/he is expected to leave within an agreed time frame. The stranger will be regarded as trustworthy (because s/he is an insider) while secrets are safe in their hands (because s/he remains an outsider).

I collected data from January to March 2002 at Engineering Ltd., in September and October 2002 at Steel Corp., and from March to June 2003 at Northern Steel. The main method of data collection was narrative interviewing (Czarniawska, 1997), i.e. qualitative in-depth interviews in which the participants were encouraged to tell about their experiences of organisational change. In total, I interviewed 30 organisational actors from each organisation from all departments, backgrounds and ranks to reflect the heterogeneity in each organisation and to examine organisational change as a multi-story process. Interviewees were selected by means of convenience sampling, respecting employees' availability for interview due to shift working patterns. Interviewee profiles are consistent across the participating organisations. All interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and returned to the interviewees for review to enhance the veracity of the data and to give the interviewees a better understanding of their organisation (see also McConkie and Boss, 1986). The interview data collected amounted to approximately 1,000 type-written pages, offering insights into shared stories and patterns of change stories. Documentary materials including newspaper articles, company reports and newsletters as well as other internal documents helped me to research the official accounts of change and contrast them with the interview data. I spent a minimum of two months in each organisation, which gave the study an ethnographic element. Observations and field notes complemented other sources of data.

The data were analysed using an inductive approach that contains elements of inductive analysis (Denzin, 1989) and grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Key steps in this interpretation process are coding and categorising data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) as well as building and testing small-scale hypotheses (Denzin, 1989). Hence, it involved constant comparison of the data across sources and also with the literature to detect patterns in the data. These patterns referred to events, organisational actors' understanding of the change situation (sensemaking), plots and themes (Boje 2001), storylines (Browning 1991) and the key actors' roles (Gabriel 2000). The coding revealed how organisational actors in each organisation explained their success in managing change and was facilitated by visual representation of the perceived cause and effect relationships among the key elements of the prevailing sensemaking and also links to contextual factors. The analysis was computer assisted by the NVivo software.

This research took a sensemaking perspective as outlined by Weick (1995, pp. 172-173). Research participants' stories of their experience with change were central to this study, and their definitions, explanations and descriptions were taken on rather than superimposed by mine. This research was social constructionist, building on the assumption that organisational actors socially construct their realities (Berger and Luckmann, 1966) through stories (Bruner, 1991). It is sensitive to contextual matters (Polkinghorne, 1995) and meets many of the quality criteria of qualitative research as outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) through the ethnographic element of this study, multiple methods of data collection and contextual interpretations of the data.

Patterns of Stories at the Frontiers of Change

The analysis presented in this paper focuses on three patterns of change stories analytically distilled from organisational actors' interpretations of change: (1) stories of 'the good old days'; (2) stories of deception, taboo and silence, and (3) stories of influence. These patterns, which prevailed in each organisation, challenge official accounts of change. The official change stories were taken for granted in the organisations, and I received copies of organisational publications telling the official stories of change, of which managers selectively highlighted the key aspects in the interview. Space precludes a detailed discussion of all these stories, so I have specifically selected one example from each organisation to illustrate one pattern, and official change stories will be summarised in the respective section below. In line with the focus of this paper, the following patterns of change stories focus on sensemaking that contests official change stories, which are a key part of each organisation's culture. They are part of an on-going social retrospective process that creates and modifies organisational realities (Weick, 1995), including organisational culture; hence, they are attempts by organisational actors to make sense of their experiences of organisational change. The vignettes (i.e. short evocative stories of personal experience used for illustrative purposes) reported below are personal to each story-teller but reflect, nevertheless, the stories that have legitimacy within each organisation.

Stories of 'the Good Old Days'

In times of organisational change, organisational actors lose treasured aspects of their daily routines and work environment (Reissner, 2008). Such loss is expressed in nostalgic stories about 'the good old days' (Gabriel, 1993), which reflect past realities and values that have lost their relevance and contradict present organisational realities. Nevertheless, such stories are a prominent means for organisational actors to make sense of their everyday experiences in a changing organisation (Gabriel, 2000) and to provide a sense of community and

continuity (Brown and Humphreys, 2002); they are therefore an integral part of an organisation's culture and identity.

This pattern is explored in the context of the British case-study organisation, Engineering Ltd., a medium-sized automotive supplier located in North-East England. The firm has undergone substantial technological and structural change since the early 1980s that had reached their climax in the late 1990s. According to the then Managing Director, the official Engineering Ltd. change story is about how recurrent crises were overcome through the introduction of robot technology, quality management, world-class manufacturing techniques and a focus on professional development. The firm's success in transforming itself from a failing organisation to one which is regarded as world class by its customers led to physical expansion of the firm. It is a positive story, rooted in a difficult past and focused on a bright future, with few deviant voices (Reissner, 2006). Mary, a retired employee with 23 years of service at Engineering Ltd., offers an insight into her experiences:

> When the [order to produce parts for a] Ford car [came]; that was a great, big boost and it was just something spectacular. ... And you thought "oh my goodness, what the people are going to make here is going on that car". And we had a great, big party [to celebrate the occasion]. There was a big buffet and drinks, such a celebration. It was nice that because it brought everybody together and everybody was happy about it. It was a lovely time, it was really a nice evening, that. And it was in the canteen over the road, but it was very, very good. Of course some people took advantage and got absolutely drunk, but that was the odd one or two. But it was a nice time, you felt really appreciated that this Ford [car] was coming to [Engineering Ltd]. But it was a nice time and it was a lovely buffet. After that ... when the new big presses came in, that was ... amazing to see then as you were going past, it was just getting bigger and bigger. And then the first time they started to work ... to see it start on just a sheet of material and all of a sudden it bounced all the way through this presses and it came out as something else at the other end. It was just amazing, all the twists and turns that the metal... That was really, really good. … All this part [of the plant] here was built on while I was working here... but it was always in my mind that it wasn't getting bigger too quick and then I thought ... it's people who're making it bigger, the management. You still thought "is it getting too

> big too quick?" …It went from a small friendly place to - still being friendly - but you didn't know the people, you couldn't say hello ... you passed people and you didn't know who they were.

Mary's story focuses on the key milestones in the firm's development – the first major order for the firm and the introduction of modern production technology, which led to the physical growth of the plant. She repeats positive expressions and one can understand how important these events were. However, towards the end of this story, Mary reveals moments of doubt over Engineering Ltd.'s rapid expansion. In such moments past interpretive systems, in this case about a small and close-knit community within the plant, do not fit present experiences (as outlined by Søderberg, 2003) and a new interpretation emerges to replace it. Mary's story contains a paradox: on the one hand, she buys into the firm's official change story and her story also constitutes part of this official account – a story of how a struggling firm transformed itself into a successful player within its chosen industry. On the other hand, it challenges the official change story by expressing doubts about the firm's expansion that constitutes and reflects the firm's success, a question which she leaves open. In this way, these doubts remain alive and constitute an important part of her story.

Towards the end, Mary also refers to a theme that seems to be vital for her and that has come up in other interviews: the loss of a family spirit that was central to Engineering Ltd. in the 'good old days'. This family spirit involved knowing everybody by name, helping one another and addressing everybody (including senior managers) by their first name. Other interviewees spoke fondly of how desks were used to play table tennis during lunch breaks, of day trips and other social events, the frequency of which declined with the physical expansion of the plant. These generalised accounts are neither questioned nor challenged by organisational actors, and this lack of questioning is typical of nostalgic stories (Gabriel, 1993) that reflect past interpretive schemes when crises made the firm more close-knit. 'The good old days' are an antidote to change and provide a means of continuity and familiarity in a changing environment (Brown and Humphreys, 2002). By highlighting the loss of the family spirit, Mary's account draws attention to the values that are central to Engineering Ltd.'s culture and self understanding: the importance of relationships within the Engineering Ltd. family. The retelling of Mary's and similar stories means that the firm's value system remains relatively stable despite technological change and physical expansion. Yet, these stories are being retold to pass on Engineering Ltd. values to newcomers; in Gabriel's (1993, p. 122) words: nostalgia is 'a social phenomenon, whose expressions are often shared with others'. Many newcomer interviewees seemed to have internalised these stories and mentioned them in the interviews, highlighting that these incidents remain a fundamental part

of the organisation. Hence, these nostalgic stories are integral to the way in which organisational actors at Engineering Ltd. have made sense of change and how they have remained true to themselves (Gabriel, 1993).

Stories of Deception, Taboo and Silence

Change stories will also reflect the needs and perceptions of individuals and groups in organisations, and contested change stories will reflect fights for power, political games and unfair play (McConkie and Boss, 1986) – all of which may be used and possibly abused by those involved in the change progress. Hence, deception and the discussion of taboo subjects are key features of change stories, and silence is equally important in such accounts. Researchers are required to question the motives and authority of these accounts (Gabriel, 2004b) before judging their authenticity and truthfulness.

This pattern is explored in the context of South Africa's employment equity (EE) programme and the way it is being operationalised at Steel Corp. The firm is among the main steel producers in the country and has undergone major organisational change since the end of Apartheid in the early 1990s. At that time, Steel Corp. found itself under pressure to increase its profitability and competitiveness in the light of increasing international competition. Restructuring programmes, including large-scale cost cutting and mass lay-offs (figures vary between 65% and 75% of the workforce being cut), improved the firm's competitiveness and position in world-wide industry rankings, but brought trauma and worry to many employees (Reissner, 2008). In addition to these economic concerns, Steel Corp. had to comply with the South African government's EE programme, which prescribes that the country's demographics be reflected throughout an organisation. While under Apartheid managers were predominantly white and workers predominantly black, Steel Corp. had to demote or lay-off white managers and fast-track employees from the black majority or Asian minority to higher positions to achieve their EE targets at managerial level, a process that had begun at the time of data collection. The official Steel Corp. story was being negotiated at the time of data collection and its emerging key aspects could be elicited from the data. This story is about the organisation transforming itself from a charity to a profitable business (Reissner, 2008) that reflects the new social order in South Africa; this represents a major shift in the organisation's culture.

The EE programme has major implications on white males in positions of responsibility. White male employees in their 50s are encouraged to accept voluntary redundancy agreements (so-called space creation packages) to enable EE candidates to take their position. Hence, unemployment among this age group is high and alternative employment is difficult

to find (Klein, 2002). This highly sensitive issue is dealt with through a complex pattern of stories that reflect organisational actors' sensemaking. The first vignette to illustrate this pattern is by Damien, a white middle manager in his late 40s with five years of service at Steel Corp. He is part of the group of employees who are in danger of losing their job to an EE candidate. This is his story:

> Have we successfully done successfully employment equity? No, not at all. … Employment equity, I think, makes good sense; there's no doubt in my mind about it. I just don't think there're enough white males around to fill all the vacancies. … And the only way to do it is [through] employment equity. Now, we have a lot of excuses, I mean. You speak to the Steel Corp. guys why we're not having a black on the management team. They don't want to come and live in [this part of the country] and this community [here] is predominantly Afrikaans, they don't want to come and live here. Then I say to them, that's fine. But how come that the power station just across the road ... of its management team eighty percent are black. And qualified. We're obviously doing something wrong.

This story is about Damien's experiences and interpretations of change in the context of EE. He will have seen many colleagues leave the organisation and EE candidates take their place. He may also have wondered when it will be time for him to make space for an EE candidate. EE is a reality for Damien and this story reflects that it is not a welcome one. It is an officially acceptable account of EE that demonstrates Damien's ability to move with the times and to cope with the threat to his job prospects and future prosperity. It contains three key elements: firstly, he criticises Steel Corp.'s approach to EE, questioning whether the organisation is doing enough to meet its EE target. Then, Damien agrees with the importance of EE and outlines the reasons ('excuses') why Steel Corp. find it difficult to meet their targets: there are not enough white managers to fill all vacancies and black people do not want to live in the area. Finally, Damien suggests that Steel Corp. is missing a trick as other organisations in their local community have already met their EE targets.

The middle part of Damien's story does not tally with the other two parts, which do have a point: EE does not seem to be a top priority within Steel Corp. as highlighted by other interviewees. The middle part, however, is the most interesting as it is factually incorrect, a misrepresentation of reality (Gabriel, 2004a). Given the high rate of unemployment among

both whites and blacks in the local community (many of whom will even have been laid off by Steel Corp.), there is a wide choice of candidates for any position. But why has Damien included these misrepresentations in his story? Before I attempt to answer this question, I will introduce the second vignette. It is by Silvia, who is in her early 30s and has been with Steel Corp. for over 10 years. She works in an internal consultancy position and is involved in recruitment decisions. Her position at Steel Corp. is relatively safe because women are also regarded as formerly disadvantaged (their traditional role was that of a housewife and mother). This is her experience:

> Honest opinion? ... We need to drive employment equity, … there's more urgency in the management levels to get [EE candidates] in. … Sometimes I think [employment equity candidates] have got the qualifications, but they don't know how to apply it, not at all. … I mean a guy with a BSc doesn't even know properly how to use a computer to make a presentation. Then I start to worry because [in such a case] employment equity is zero worth to you. And I think that's in most cases what happens. … Most of your employment equity candidates have got this attitude about them: "I'm employment equity, I know best, you have to employ me" and that's it. … The overall white guys seem to be more goal-driven. … They make sure that the information they give is correct. … If they're not sure they ask, but they don't just assume. You don't always get that with an EE-candidate. … They don't understand the content [of their job] and why they're doing it. … They don't dig into that problem and work it out for themselves.

Silvia suggests that not all EE appointments are wise because candidates may lack skills and experience. She may even have a point here as many EE candidates are university graduates with little work experience. While Silvia acknowledges the need for more EE managers to meet the target, she is openly critical about EE, contrasting the characteristics of EE candidates with those of white employees. Silvia's story paints a black and white picture in a double sense – a picture in which whites are portrayed as superior. It is a generalised account that may be used to reinforce a topic that has become a taboo over recent years: racial superiority of the white minority. Very few employees acknowledged this on tape, but informal conversations with white Steel Corp. employees, both past and present, revealed that

this is an important undercurrent in the sea of stories circulating in the community that Steel Corp. serves.

The motives behind Damien's and Silvia's stories need to be questioned (Gabriel, 2004b) to understand how they make sense of EE. In both cases, there is an awareness that Steel Corp. needs to do more to meet its EE targets, particularly at managerial level. However, EE challenges their deeply held assumptions about their role and identity. Due to a lack of current interpretive schemes, they fall back on familiar ones which are deeply rooted in Apartheid to reduce uncertainty and anxiety (Bean and Eisenberg, 2006). Damien's factual misrepresentations and Silvia's prejudices will be their way of dealing with tension, anxiety and fear (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991) and will enable them to maintain their self-worth (Allard-Poesi, 2005). To go back to Søderberg (2003), both Damien's and Silvia's frame of reference about their role and identity does not match their current experiences. Both rely on what they consider to be a good story to resolve this contradiction. These stories, imperfect as they are, serve a deeper truth than that of facts (Gabriel, 2004a), in this case a threat to their future status and prosperity. These stories contest the official story of the new South Africa, the 'rainbow nation', in which equal opportunities are celebrated. Damien's story deceives the reader into thinking that EE is an accepted part of Steel Corp.'s realities, whereas it is more likely a means to make sense of a threat to his future prosperity. Silvia's story deals openly with a topic that has become a taboo, thus explicitly challenging the evolving stories about equality at Steel Corp. While neither Damien nor Silvia seem to have rewritten their past interpretive schemes, usually the outcome of sensemaking (Bruner, 1986), they are engaging in story-work and have found a way to make sense of EE that is meaningful to them in their quest to construct a new social reality. This new reality, however, remains heavily influenced by past and increasingly obsolete frames of reference within the organisation's culture and self-understanding.

The use of silence also needs highlighting here. Black employees, who are at the heart of EE, do not talk about it. In the interviews, all nine black interviewees (both from managerial and shop-floor positions) celebrated their increased job prospects at Steel Corp. since the collapse of Apartheid (Reissner, 2006), but they did not refer to EE. They seem to remain reluctant to address a topic that was a fantasy for decades: equal opportunities independent of ethnic background. Hence, their story of EE, which is an important part of modern-day Steel Corp., is silent and unacknowledged. There are also other dynamics at work, concerning the context in which these stories were told. Damien seemed to be reluctant to admit to a young, female, foreign researcher that EE is a real threat for him and uses deception to uphold an illusion of strength, thus confirming himself (Allard-Poesi, 2005). Silvia seems to have viewed the

research interview as a space in which she can release the frustration (Jones, 1991) about EE candidates to which she alluded in her story. My black interviewees seem to have been too embarrassed to talk about EE, perhaps not wanting to give the impression that they have received their position because of EE rather than merit.

In conclusion, these two vignettes highlight different uses of stories in the process of making sense of change, i.e. organisational actors' attempts to attribute meaning to new realities, cope with a contradiction between their expectations and reality (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2005), and maintain their self-worth (Allard-Poesi, 2005). Both Damien and Silvia have created a story that is real and meaningful to them. Through such stories, this past interpretive scheme is kept alive and passed on – even though it has lost its relevance.

Stories of Influence

Stories are a tool to exercise social power (Watson and Bargiela-Ciappini, 1998) and control (McConkie and Boss, 1986), and such use of change stories requires particular attention to understand the social dynamics in an organisation. This narrative pattern is explored in the context of Northern Steel. The firm is among the largest steel producers in the Russian Federation and employs in excess of 30,000 people. The plant started operations in the 1940s and was part of the intricate Soviet heavy industry system until the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. A young businessman, CEO Mr Mikhailov, took control of the plant and began to transform it according to the Western understanding of how a business should be run. Privatisation and diversification followed soon afterwards, facilitated by strategic and operational change. Senior management actively encourage managers to study for an MBA in the United Kingdom and front-line employees to visit steel plants abroad in order to learn how steel is produced elsewhere; these initiatives constitute a new way of working at Northern Steel.

There is an intense pride in the organisation about its development and achievements, which is exhibited in the firm's museum – a relic of Soviet times that serves a new purpose today. A number of recent certificates and awards are proudly displayed there alongside more dusty artefacts from the past; this constitutes a central part of the firm's culture and self understanding. Many interviewees outlined their pride to work for such a progressive organisation and highlighted the privileges that follow (see Reissner, 2008 for details). The hero of this success is CEO Mr Mikhailov who is hailed by employees as the creator of this new way of working. His speeches were mentioned widely in the research interviews and his word is trusted and internalised. The emerging official stories about this new way of working draw on the traditional collective spirit in the plant and imply that every employee is part of

this new reality. Managers who have graduated with an MBA degree from a UK university spoke enthusiastically about a new understanding of conducting business, citing tools that they find particularly useful in their daily work. They also highlight the benefits for the organisation and are proud to be part of the firm's progress.

There are, however, a few voices that contest this notion of inclusiveness, which is epitomised by Eve's experiences. She is a member of staff in her 40s with an engineering background and has worked at Northern Steel for over 20 years, most of that time in HR. This is her story:

> But I'm of that age now that [I don't get into courses]. Over the age of forty you hardly get into the big training programmes … like [a specific training programme for senior managers] … or the MBA-programme … for the higher specialists, managers and so on. … There's more opportunity for development now, which we didn't have in our time. … Training's important because [our CEO] said once that women over the age of forty couldn't do anything in the organisation. That was a long time ago, maybe ten years. Back then, obviously, I wasn't forty yet and I thought "what's that about?" But now at the height of my age I think that basically he was right. Simply living your life and communicating with a small circle of people, you already miss out a lot. There's no development. I think that a reduction [in our ability] might even start because you've got experience and you don't worry about things you've got to learn.

Eve suggests that professional development is an important feature at Northern Steel and names two prominent initiatives. However, she also suggests that women over 40 are excluded from formal development required to move into management positions because of their age and gender because according to Mr Mikhailov they could not contribute to the organisation. After initial anger Eve seems to agree with Mr Michailov and explains that she was naïve at the time thinking that everybody could contribute to the organisation and gives examples of her own experience in support. In particular, Eve refers to complacency on her part due to experience and a lack of interaction with the wider Northern Steel community. She has constructed a story that is credible and important to her, relieving the contradiction between her initial beliefs and her experiences at Northern Steel (Bryant and Wolfram Cox,

2005); this is sensemaking (Søderberg, 2003) in context, which is influenced by the organisation's culture and identity.

Eve's story demonstrates that stories can be influenced by others that exhibit an alternative interpretive system (Balogun and Johnson, 2005), in this case that of Mr Mikhailov. According to the majority of interviewees he has never been wrong in this judgement, and many organisational actors find it difficult to imagine the contrary in an attempt to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety (Bean and Eisenberg, 2006) that the changes at Steel Corp. bring with them. Mr Mikhailov is regarded as a beacon of stability in turbulent times, which give his views power over organisational actors, which are constituted in cultural shifts. The motives for Mr Mikhailov's comment on women over the age of 40 are not known as a transcript of this speech was not available and he was not part of the interview sample. In spite of this, this comment (or at least Eve's understanding of it) exerted much influence over Eve and she accepts this view without questioning. She has rewritten her story in the light of Mr Mikhailov's comments, using evidence from her daily routine to confirm them. This puts Mr Mikhailov into a position in which he could exert power (Watson and Bargiela-Ciappini, 1998), control (McConkie and Boss, 1986), manipulate and oppress (Gabriel, 2004a). This has major implications for the narrative dynamics in organisations under conditions of change, which are currently ill understood. Sensemaking is an open-ended process and organisational actors will selectively appropriate parts of their stories for their own. The outcomes of this process may be counter-productive to the organisation as new realities may be created and enacted on distorted stories and frames of reference. At the time of data collection, two prominent sets of stories competed with each other: stories of learning, development and progress on the one hand and stories of exclusion and a lack of opportunities on the other. It is yet to be seen how organisational actors will make sense of these contradicting stories.

Patterns of Change: Discussion and Conclusion

The three patterns of stories discussed above demonstrate that stories of change have a dual purpose. On the one hand, they are powerful sensemaking tools that help organisational actors deal with the contradiction between expectations and experiences (Bryant and Wolfram Cox, 2003) and to create new meanings (Brown, 2000; Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995). In each case, organisational actors' interpretive schemes were challenged by organisational change, requiring new ways of understanding changes in their daily work. Not all of them have made sense of change yet (particularly Damien and Silvia), but all of them have found a story that is meaningful to them and helps them bridge the gap between expectation and experience.

On the other hand, each of the above stories contests official change stories (Gabriel, 2004a). The nostalgic qualities of Mary's story pass on the organisation's values to newcomers providing a sense of continuity (Brown and Humphreys, 2002). Damien's deception and Silvia's taboo story are means to confirm themselves (Allard-Poesi, 2005) during change. Eve's story highlights the power of the tale to exercise influence and social control (McConkie and Boss, 1986). The underlying dynamics of this process are currently ill understood, but my findings suggest that the stage of the change process, relationships within the firm and other cultural aspects are important factors. The phase of the change process in which a story originates in reflects the number and type of stories that circulate in an organisation as organisational actors' story-work becomes more uniform over time through convergence of sensemaking and sense-giving (Dunford and Jones, 2000). In Mary's case, the turbulent times of change have passed, allowing her to indulge in nostalgic musings about 'the good old days' and mourn the loss of the family spirit in the plant. In contrast, Damien's, Silvia's and Eve's stories were collected earlier in the change process when the negotiation of meaning was still on-going. All three interviewees draw on familiar, yet increasingly irrelevant interpretive schemes, possibly in an attempt to reduce the uncertainty and anxiety (Bean and Eisenberg, 2006) that the changes in their organisations have brought with them and they have yet to fully digest the changes in their respective organisation.

My findings also suggest that organisational culture, particularly social relationships within an organisation, are an important factor in organisational actors' sensemaking. In both Mary's and Eve's case, the social relationships within the firm are strong and largely regarded as healthy: Mary's story nostalgically alludes to the family spirit in the plant, while Eve's story highlights the trust Northern Steel employees have in their CEO. These strong relationships will have supported their sensemaking at the height of the change, enabling organisational actors to negotiate new and shared interpretive schemes. As Eve's experiences suggest, however, these strong relationships can also exert undue power over organisational actors' sensemaking and influence their stories, understanding and behaviours. In contrast, social relationships at Steel Corp. remain tainted by the racial tensions of the past, as both Damien's and Silvia's story exemplify. Social relationships will impact on the story-work that is taking place in an organisation, particularly when it comes to exchanging interpretations and tentative explanations at the height of change. Hence, my findings confirm the importance of contextual factors such as social relationships within an organisation with regard to the dynamics of sensemaking (Balogun and Johnson, 2005).

The sensemaking perspective adopted in this paper encourages researchers to look at the different stages of the sensemaking process in line with different phases of change. Sensemaking is triggered by a contradiction between expectation and experience in the early stages of change. As organisational actors engage in intense story-work at the height of change, alternative interpretations will develop that are often contested, fluid and temporary; this is the case in Damien's, Silvia's and Eve's stories. In the later stages of change, organisational actors' storytelling activity will focus on an increasingly narrow and stable repertoire of stories, as Mary's example highlights. My findings lead to the question of how these processes of sensemaking might be further studied. The key area that requires further research is the examination of other potential uses of stories in the different phases of the change process and in different organisational contexts. The examination of organisational actors' story-work in the different phases of change and the associated change stories will provide a better understanding of how new interpretive schemes are constructed and negotiated and which other factors influence these processes. Stories are time-bound and context specific (including cultural aspects). This study has indicated that the contexts of story-work are complex and extend beyond the organisation into the geo-political and historical environment it functions in. A focus on stories that contest the official change stories in an organisation allows researchers to gain a better understanding of the experiences and agendas of those organisational actors whose views are rarely sought and contest the official stories, thus leading to a richer understanding of organisational change. However, organisational stories are not always understood as they are intended but always filtered through a thicket of stories and perceptions that are re-framed and re-interpreted. More studies of organisational change should take this into account.

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[i] All names have been altered to protect the organisations' and interviewees' identities.