THE STORYTELLING ORGANIZATION: A STUDY OF STORY PERFORMANCE IN AN OFFICE-SUPPLY FIRM by Boje, David .M.,

This paper reports on a participant-observation study in a large office-supply firm of how people perform stories to make sense of events, introduce change, and gain political advantage during their conversations. The story was not found to be a highly agreed-upon text, told from beginning to end, as it has been studied in most prior story research. Rather, the stories were dynamic, varied by context, and were sometimes terse, requiring the hearer to fill in silently major chunks of story line, context, and implication. Stories were frequently challenged, reinterpreted, and revised by the hearers as they unfolded in conversation. The paper supports a theory of organization as a collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members' sense making and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional memory.[A]

INTRODUCTION

Organizations As Storytelling Systems

In organizations, storytelling is the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders. People engage in a dynamic process of incremental refinement of their stories of new events as well as on-going reinterpretations of culturally sacred story lines. When a decision is at hand, the old stories are recounted and compared to unfolding story lines to keep the organization from repeating historically bad choices and to invite the repetition of past successes. In a turbulent environment, the organization halls and offices pulsate with a story life of the here and now that is richer and more vibrant than the firm's environments.

Even in stable times, the story is highly variable and sometimes political, in that part of the collective processing involves telling different versions of stories to different audiences. Only the chief executive officer (CEO) and a few executives may be told that the sales manager was fired for drunken indiscretions with a saleswoman on the CEO's couch; vendors only hear that the manager did not get on with the CEO; customers learn that Fred resigned; middle management suspects an affair with Mildred. Each performance is never the completed story; it is an unraveling process of confirming new data and new interpretations as these become part of an unfolding story line.

Stories are to the storytelling system what precedent cases are to the judicial system. Just as in the courtroom, stories are performed among stakeholders to make sense of an equivocal situation. The implication of stories as precedents is that story performances are part of an organization-wide information-processing network. Bits and pieces of organization experience are recounted socially throughout the firm to formulate recognizable, cogent, defensible, and seemingly rational collective accounts that will serve as precedent for individual assumption, decision, and action. This is the institutional memory system of the organization. Although individuals are limited

information processors, each person retains a part of the story line, a bit of interpretation, story performance practices, and some facts that confirm a line of reasoning.

Even when there are eye witnesses, to continue the analogy with courtroom behavior, the interpretation of the exact sequence of events and how those events speak of the motive of the defendant are made or broken in the performance of the story and by the credibility of the teller. What is interesting about storytelling in organizations is that stakeholders also posit alternative stories with alternative motives and implications to the very same underlying historical incident. The story takes on more importance than mere objective facts. In complex organizations, part of the reason for storytelling is the working out of those differences in the interface of individual and collective memory.

The important fact is that most storytelling is done in conversation and involves the listeners in various ways. Some sociolinguists have analyzed how conversations happen and, in a few studies, how stories are told: how people introduce stories, how they extend and interrupt stories, and, in general, how story performances occur within common turn-byturn talk situations. Harvey Sacks (1972a, 1972b) and his followers (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; Jefferson, 1973, 1978; Ryave, 1978) have investigated the contexted occurrence of stories in conversations. These are complex aspects of storytelling in organizations that have been ignored in previous approaches to story analysis. We all tell stories, and during better performances we feel the adrenalin pump as word pictures dance in our intellect and we begin to live the episode vicariously or recall similar life events. In just listening to stories, our personal experience mingles with what we hear and then see. As listeners, we are co-producers with the teller of the story performance. It is an embedded and fragmented process in which we fill in the blanks and gaps between the lines with our own experience in response to cues, like "You know the story!" Because of what is not said, and yet shared, the audible story is only a fraction of the connection between people in their co-production performance. We become even more of a co-producer when we begin to prompt the teller with cues, such as head nods, changes in posture, and utterances that direct the inquiry (i.e., "One version I heard . . ."; "Then, what happened?") and respond with our own data. The story can be conceptualized as a joint performance of teller(s) and hearer(s) in which often overlooked, very subtle utterances play an important role in the negotiation of meaning and co-production in a storytelling episode.

Stories-As-Texts Research

Stories in previous laboratory, history, and questionnaire research generally have been wrenched from their natural performance contexts and treated as objectified social facts (Ritzer, 1975), mere texts, with little empirical attention given to the natural linguistic context in which the stories are being performed. Text research does not capture basic aspects of the situated language performance, such as how the story is introduced into the ongoing interaction, how listeners react to the story, and how the story affects subsequent dialogue.

In case history studies, researchers have relied on second and third-hand accounts of a story, rather than examining a storytelling event in process. An example of the text-associal-fact paradigm would be the IBM rule-breaking story analyzed by Martin et al. (1983). The point of their analysis was to answer the question, How is it that markedly similar story texts manifest themselves in different organizations? The story was uncovered by Martin et al. in an earlier autobiographical text by Rogers (1969), not from any direct field observation or any systematic on-site data collection procedures that would tell us the origins and import of the story, if any, to IBM. The story told by Rogers (1969: 153-154) is as follows:

. . . a twenty-two-year-old bride weighing ninety pounds whose husband had been sent overseas and who, in consequence, had been given a job until his return ......The young woman, Lucille Burger, was obliged to make certain that people entering security areas wore the correct clearance identification.

Surrounded by his usual entourage of white-shined men, Watson approached the doorway to an area where she was on guard, wearing an orange badge acceptable elsewhere in the plant, but not a green badge, which alone permitted entrance at her door.

"I was trembling in my uniform, which was far too big," she recalled. "It hid my shakes but not my voice. 'I'm sorry,' I said to him. I knew who he was all right. 'You cannot enter. Your admittance is not recognized.' that's what we were supposed to say."

The men accompanying Watson were stricken; the moment held unpredictable possibilities. "Don't you know who he is?" someone hissed. Watson raised his hand for silence, while one of the party strode off and returned with the appropriate badge.

The story is literature and its plot and characters are indeed interesting, but is it the way IBMers tell stories to one another in real time? Other historical studies of stories, such as Clark's (1972: 179), start with inferred results of storytelling processes to capture areas of organization uniqueness. However, according to Moch and Fields (1985: 112), "since language [in acts or speech or in writing] serves to advance actors' interests, the analyst must make every effort to gather information which will allow for a reliable and valid inference about the intentions of those who generated the data to be analyzed." In stories-as-text research, the object-story is deconstructed and reinterpreted with virtually no attention to gathering performance-context information. Martin and Meyerson (1988), for example, reify stories as mere "its" when they speak of stories as so many cultural artifacts. Although there is reason to question both the method and the validity of the stories-as-text approach, Mumby (1987) nevertheless reinterpreted the IBM rule-breaking story and took quantum leaps from the literary text of the story in order to make ideological and power assumptions about the IBM culture. Valid and insightful as these assumptions may be, can we be assured that this story is really a reflection of the IBM culture?

In the case of lab-study research, performance skills are not a consideration. Rather, one varies the content of the story to look at outcomes such as retention and believability

(Martin and Powers, 1979; Martin, Patterson, and Price, 1979; Martin et al., 1980). Subjects are presented with alternative versions of a story to assess their level of recall and commitment. Martin's (1982: 296) advice to management is "If a manager wants to maximize the impact of a story, she or he should make that story as concrete as possible." While this is a significant effect in the lab, in terms of recall and affect, the transition from the lab to the organization is fraught with difficulties. For example, should stories in organization settings always be told with such concreteness? An important aspect of performance in real organizations may be to strategically omit or include details about characters, contextual cues, and plot elements.

Story-text studies relying on interview methods have also ignored performance behavior. Alvin Gouldner (1954: 80), for example, collected intriguing stories about Doug and his successor, Vincent. Employees "overflowed with stories which highlighted the differences between the two managers." He then analyzed these differences using the "Rebecca Myth" from Daphne DuMaurier's novel about a young woman who married a widower only to be plagued by the memory of his first wife, Rebecca. An astute analysis, but the study does not tell us about the natural behavior context in which these stories were performed by workers and managers as they went about their daily activities.

Finally, in the case of surveys, the textual content, rather than the storytelling event is the focus of study. Survey researchers seek to capture the types of stories being circulated and the subject's recall of particular stories. While these are important considerations, surveys ignore behavioral interactions that constituted the storytelling event. For example, in Wilkins' (1979) study of both low- and high-performing companies, the stories were reconstructed as raters scored story content on a set of response scales. Such an approach does not tell us about how those stories were performed in their natural element. Similarly, Lombardo's (1986), and McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison's (1989) interviews with 86 executives as they recalled significant vignettes is interesting life-history work, but it is not a behavioral analysis of in situ performance. Siehl and Martin's (1982) survey assessing sales trainees' knowledge of four stories measures recall but not performance. Finally, McConkie and Boss (1986) reported that one organization story, the "Firing of Elayne," was mentioned by 85 percent of their interviewees, but once again we do not learn how this story was performed. Each of these survey studies is useful for its own research purposes; however, the method is not useful for assessing storytelling and storytellers in their natural context.

Studying the storytelling episodes themselves offers several advantages. First, because stories are contextually embedded, their meaning unfolds through the storytelling performance event. Folklorists, like Kirshenblatt-Gimglett (1975), Hymes (1975), Jones, Moore, and Snyder (1988), and especially Georges (1969,1980a, 1980b, 1981), call us to the other extreme of the story-as-text paradigm, where "the story" has no existence apart from and is indeed inseparable from the event during which the story is performed (Georges, 1980a: 324). Stories can therefore be correctly interpreted only to the extent that the researcher grasps the story in situ. Second, identifying stories in context will be rewarded by the discovery that there are a multitude of stories that are not discernable at first. A finding in sociolinguistic studies is that stories are brief and fragmented across

extended and interrupted discourse, but this has been ignored in organization studies. Third, researchers can "unpack" very brief enactments in dialogue to discover the reality underlying the linguistic enactments (Boje, 1989). For example, some tellings may initiate change (Boje, Fedor, and Rowland, 1982; Wilkins, 1984; McWhinney and Batista, 1988; Akin and Schultheiss, 1990), others advance a political view, others predict the stability or transience of relationships and agreements, while others are attempts to isolate and make sense of the impact of turbulent events (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1975; Boje and Ulrich, 1985).

Stories As Performance and Text

Because "the story" behind the story as performed is analogous to the text of it, text and performance can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. For example, in everyday conversation, we make discursive reference to stories as texts in such phrases as "You know that part of his story, don't you?"; "That's my story too"; "You need to get the story straight"; "To make a long story short . . ."; or "l won't bore you with the whole story; You know it!" These phrases are part of a language we use to signal the parts of the performance that will be shared, as we co-produce and manage the story performances, the parts of the story that will be filled in by our listeners' imaginations. People are engaged in a dynamic process of incremental refinement to the story lines of even very widely accepted story texts. Performances at times refer to taken-for-granted texts ("You know the story."), and story performance is a process in which people interact to incorporate new tales continuously into the corporate culture while rewriting oral history by revising the old stories that anchor the present to the past. Only in the rare instance in which the storyteller is faced with a researcher or a new applicant is he or she likely to tell the whole story, since much of the detail of the story cannot be safely assumed to be recreatable in the novice's imagination.

Predictions

If storytelling is seen as performance and text, there are several predictions about storytelling in organizations: First, a lot of attention will be given to negotiating the story-line interpretation and processing collectively the numerous sides to a story. Second, the completeness of the storytelling itself will vary from one sector and level of the organization to the next One story will take a more abbreviated form with those in-the-know, who are expected to know the particulars, but the same story will be told with a lot more detail to newcomers, outsiders, and most likely to researchers. Third, a related issue is what anthropologists refer to as ownership or "entitlement" rights. 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."). Certain people will have entitlement rights to a story. Fourth, being a player in the storytelling organization is being skilled enough to manage the person-to-person interaction to get the story line woven into the ongoing turn-by-turn dialogue using a broad class of behaviors called qualifiers, markers, and the like, that sustain storytelling across extended discourse by means of paralinguistic and kinesic cues such as head nods, postural shifts, and eyebrow raises. Finally, one relevant research finding from

sociolinguistics (Ryave, 1978) is that stories often occur in series across extended discourse ("Oh, I have a story to top that one."). Stories performed in organizations will occur in series across discourse.

The organization as a storytelling system was explored in a participant-observer study of interactions in a firm that, although it is not well known like IBM or some other organizations that story-as-text researchers have studied, provided a wealth of stories complexly and variously performed in everyday conversation.

METHOD

In keeping with Glaser and Strauss (1967), as a participant observer I iteratively collected and analyzed (Spradley, 1980) the various social scenes that made up the discourse environment of an office-supply firm. These scenes included executive meetings held on- and off-site: in conference rooms, restaurants, sales training sessions, as well as conversations in hallways and automobiles.

Research site. Everyday organization conversations were taped to capture spontaneous storytelling episodes among seven executives and twenty-three managers, customers, and vendors of a large office-supply firm. Data were collected in five branch offices as well as the headquarters. The names of the company and its stakeholders have been changed in the transcripts that follow in order to protect their confidentiality. The firm, called here "Gold," is 35 years old with 300 employees and over $50 million in annual sales. Gold operates in one region of the United States, with six branches in several states. While Gold turns a respectable profit each year, it has been going through some turbulent changes. These changes include five CEOs in the past two years and being acquired by its second conglomerate. The struggle of Gold is that of a family company, founded by a salesman, coming of age as a conglomerate-owned corporation. What was OK in the once family-operated corporation was not OK when ownership switched to a dollars-and-cents driven conglomerate. It was no longer OK, for example, to send the boys to Hawaii or pass along a case of wine to a manager's wife. Customers, vendors, salespeople, and managers report how Doug, the latest CEO, managed the transitions of this office-supply firm and steered it away from further moral failure.

The data set consists of over 100 hours of tape recordings, along with video-recordings of two corporate-sponsored focus groups with key customers and vendors. Where video or tape recording was not feasible, field notes were used as a supplement.

Procedures. Tapes were transcribed and converted to line-numbered transcripts. Transcripts were analyzed to find the scantiest occurrences of story performance embedded in conversation. A story performance was operationally defined as an exchange between two or more persons during which a past or anticipated experience was being referenced, recounted, interpreted, or challenged. A search was made of the entire episode in which the scant performance occurred for more pieces to each story line. In addition, to further verify a story had in fact occurred, the topic was cross-indexed and traced in other segments of dialogue to recover more of the story line or an alternative

story line. The procedure presumes a seemingly insignificant reference to experience could upon cross-checking prove to be highly significant to understanding organization processes. Finally, stories were catalogued according to the type of experience pattern presented in the story line, using the following eight categories:

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P1: Story-line pattern that is still going on.
P2: Story-line pattern that is expected to repeat.
P3: Story-line pattern is the same as another pattern.
P4: Story-line pattern that will no longer repeat.
P5: Story-line pattern that is changing.
P6: Story-line pattern that is unfolding.
P7: Story-line pattern that is being challenged.
P8: Story-line pattern that was not expected.
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The transcripts were thus culled for references to bits of past, unfolding, or anticipated experience that were being enacted through performance throughout the firm. These talk and ethnographic observations were entered into a computer program called "ETHNOGRAPH" (Seidel and Clark, 1984) to isolate and catalogue the occurrence of stories within ongoing conversational discourse. "ETHNOGRAPH" adds line numbers and allows the user to enter codes that can be used to retrieve sections of text, but recoding to combine or split out more specific codes is quite cumbersome. In fact, to properly interconnect bits and pieces of story across settings and actors it was necessary to use manual searches of extended printouts of dialogue before and after each story reference. Finally, to ensure accuracy of intonation, hesitation, and interruption behavior, I personally transcribed the tapes into "ETHNOGRAPH," which took in excess of 400 hours over the eight-month duration of this study. Conventions for transcription adapted by Gronn (1983,1985), in keeping with work by Stubbs (1983) and Schenkein (1978), were used in this study:

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//        Overlapping talk from the first to the last slash.
          Utterances
          begin with an upper-case letter and end with a
          period.

...       A pause of one second or less within an utterance.
(2.0)     A pause of more than one second within an utterance or
          between turns, the number indicates the length of the
          pause.

[* * *]   A deletion.

[]        An explanatory insertion.

Italics   A word or part of a word emphasized by a speaker.

?         A question, marked by a rise in pitch.

!         An exclamation, marked by a rise in pitch or intense
          body language.
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FINDINGS

The findings will be discussed at two levels. On the surface level, it is important to look at the mechanics of the storytelling episode, i.e., how the story occurs within discourse. Although this sounds simple, the storytelling did not appear in concise sequences of storytellers recounting full texts to passive listeners. As will be seen in the sample texts, people told their stories in bits and pieces, with excessive interruptions of story starts, with people talking over each other to share story fragments, and many aborted storytelling attempts. That is what I will refer to as the surface level of the story.

The second level of findings relates to the different ways stories are employed among stakeholders in this office-supply firm. Stories contain story-line patterns, and storytelling is defined operationally as a pattern-finding, pattern-elaboration, or pattern-fitting episode to make sense of wider organization processes and relationships. The various types of story-line patterns found in this study are listed in Table 1. In each storytelling episode there is a story-line pattern adopted by stakeholders to model either a past, unfolding, or anticipated experience. The sense making, change, and politics proceeds by participants collectively performing a story as an analogy pattern onto collective experience, which can only be apprehended in story performance.

The first story was performed by the CEO and his executives in a hotel room where they gathered to strategize which divisions and which branches should be eliminated. The CEO, called here Doug, and the vice presidents, called here Sam, Ruth, Jim, Mike, Harmon, and Kora are at an executive meeting. It is an occasion on which one might expect long-tenured executives to perform a founding story to explain how things came to be the way they are.

On the surface level, this story involves important surface behaviors having to do with moving in and out of turn-by-turn talk to engage in storytelling. For example, there is topic-relevant turn-by-turn talk prior to the story (1154-7 is one turn). In some instances, the teller seeks permission to tell the story (1158-9), receives or is denied permission (1160-1), and receives encouragement or discouragement in completing the story (1165-6).

These utterances also point to the ownership rights that are tied implicitly to the telling of a story. Only certain people are allowed to tell certain tales. Sam, for example, had served longer at Gold than anyone at this meeting and was an eyewitness. Further, the executives relied on him and even expected him to relate relevant story data to them (1160-1). Lines 1163-4 allude to the teller and the hearers being intimately familiar with the text or skeletal script of the story. The performance proceeds as a co-produced and collective activity. For example, someone besides the teller, in this case the CEO, initiates the telling, someone else tells it, and the CEO contributes the moral of the story (1154-7, 1174-82).

Going beyond this surface level, this first episode is an example of using a story of a past event to cast in a new light a division that may be put on the block as a "nice toy," but a

toy they no longer have the luxury of owning. Further, a current decision is being keyed to the performance of a founding story as a precedent and to the latest CEO's new interpretation of that story. Finally, in a hundred hours of taped talk, this was the most complete rendition of an organization story. As will be seen, more frequently, bits and pieces of the organization story were shared and the hearer was left to fill in the blanks, based on his or her knowledge of the story behind the verbalized story.

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S1: Goldco Founding Story
Doug: [* * *] I look at Goldco as a toy that      1154
      somebody decided to put in the company      1155
      because it was fun and it also brought      1156
      in/                                         1157

Sam:  Well/ I'll tell you how that came           1158
      about                                       1159

Doug: I thought you would (lots of laughter       1160
      from the group)                             1161

Sam:  Sam Coche worked for Sea Breeze or          1162
      something like that, oh you know the        1163
      story?                                      1164

Doug: No go ahead tell it, really it's            1165
      important.                                  1166

Sam:  He got out there and he came over and       1167
      they formed Goldco and Goldco does          1168
      not mean Gold Company or anything           1169
      else they took the first four              1170
      initials from Billy Gold, which is          1171
      G O L D and from Coche and that's how       1172
      they got  Goldco.                           1173

Doug: And it was a good living for a couple       1174
      of people. It was a nice toy for            1175
      Billy, he made a few bucks on the           1176
      thing. He had some fun for it but           1177
      then the motivation at that time was a      1178
      whole lot different than it is today.       1179
      We don't have the luxury of screwing        1180
      around with something like that /(lots      1181
      of cross talk at this point)/               1182
      (Returns to turn-by-turn talk.)
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Filling in the story blanks. In this next story, one untold part of the story that certainly all these executives know, and I dug out in subsequent field interviews with them, is that Ed Fox engaged in very questionable behavior and was replaced by yet another and another CEO, until our current CEO. Doug took the job and became the recognized champion for some very serious reforms. Sam references, for example, the CEO's attempts to reform Gold by instituting an executive committee (line 728), which is quite a departure from the practices of earlier CEOs. The executives, for example, know that Raymond, a former CEO, was once a hero figure who added several branch offices and

divisions during the growth phase at Gold but is now being resymbolized as autocratic and lacking in good business skills. There is some melodrama between the lines in this story. Ed Fox was a replacement CEO for Raymond Smith, who walked the line between doing good things for the organization, like adding more branches, and engaging in questionable practices, like nepotism and pocketing funds. Nepotism and seeking to enhance the personal fortunes of one's family are considered OK for a founder but were not OK when a conglomerate acquired Gold and replaced Raymond, the founder's successor, with Ed Fox.

The story is quite abbreviated (727-31), and the full meaning is inaccessible unless one explores Gold extensively to unpack the full meaning of story referents. Although many researchers might challenge if this excerpt is a story at all, the teller, Sam, does identify the telling as a story by interjecting, "I guess you heard this all already" (732) and "I guess you heard the whole story before" (736-7). Even the words "you know" invite the hearer to fill in the blanks. This is an example of a storyteller briefly referencing a full story line, which I observed thoughout the stories shared by executives, managers, salespeople, vendors, and customers.

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S2: Reno Branch Story

Sam:   I think five years ago there was no          727
       Executive Committee. He just ran            728
       the place the way he wanted as if you       729
       wasn't here. Raymond was [conglomerate's]   730
       man and he did what he pleased.             731
       I guess you heard this all already          732

Dave: I heard about the high growth (nodding)      733

Sam:   Yes we picked up San Diego                  734

Dave: Reno?                                         735

Sam:   Ed Fox picked up Reno and I guess           736
       you heard the whole story before.           737
       That's why we picked up Reno because        738
       Ed Fox had that with his father. You        739
       know.                                        740
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Terse storytelling. But just how abbreviated can a story be and still be classified as a story? The shortest story form is when one person says to the other, "You know the story!" It can be so brief that the performance is barely distinguishable from other nonperformance utterances. I call this filling-in-the-blanks form terse storytelling. Much of the story that is told is not actually uttered. A terse telling is an abbreviated and succinct simplification of the story in which parts of the plot, some of the characters, and segments of the sequence of events are left to the hearer's imagination. One hypothesis is that the terser the telling, the more shared the understanding of the social context, since insiders know what to leave to the imagination. Police, firemen, and the office-supply firm stakeholders use coded, brief utterances to communicate lots of understanding. Terse telling also prevents the story line from being too well understood by the wrong people.

The terser the telling, the less sharing of understanding of the social context can be detected by outsiders.

In discussing terse telling, I shall make explicit which purpose is being played out. For example, in the S2 transcript, I am Dave and I am a participant but also, at this early stage, an outsider. Sam, I believe, is carefully confirming what I know and that the CEO told me the complete underlying story. In theory, my knowledge of institutional memory is being tested. I, for my part, am nodding in agreement and offering up data to establish that I merit deeper revelations from Sam. In this instance, I assume he is telling tersely because he does not want to give me more understanding than the CEO expects me to have.

In the next transcript, the context is a discussion of why people are so resistant to change. This type of story-line pattern uses story segments to explore how a pattern of resistance has formed within Gold. As Doug, also present, seeks to reform Gold and implement controls such as bonuses based on performance and hiring based on competency, the story line these executives have lived by for ten years is being explored and challenged.

The surface structure of the story is as follows: one vice president, Ruth, begins with an assertion: "I think paranoia ran high in this company" (438-9) and then follows it up with an invitation to Sam to tell a story (440-1). This is followed by a terse storytelling (442-5) using an abbreviated code, since as interviews revealed, everyone present knew the full story line. In this exchange, Sam, while invited to follow up with his own story, remains quiet (441-3). Instead, the group takes off on one of the concluding moral assertions: "People were afraid to hire people that were better than they were" (446-7) and then restates the moral in inverse form (453-5).

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S3: Hire No One-Better Story

Ruth: Over and over again in all your          436
      notes and blurbs and all on what         437
      people were saying, I think paranoia     438
      ran high in this company in that last    439
      10 years, especially under Raymond       440
      Smith I'm sure Sam could share           441
      a few examples (laughter). Examples of   442
      when he was out pulling invoices out     443
      in the warehouse while he was the        444
      frigging controller of the company.      445
      People were afraid to hire people        446
      that were better than they were I        447
      mean we have an assistant controller     448
      that can't run Lotus and it's not a      449
      jam, but we do. You see I don't          450
      understand, I have--never have. In       451
      order to have a company that is going    452
      to grow, we actually have to hire and    453
      nurture people that are better than      454
      we are                                   455

Kora: And unfortunately the frame of mind,    456
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        the mindset that has been in the          457
        company for so long, because of all of    458
        the turnover and the turmoil with          459
        upper management, is l could lose my       460
        job tomorrow                               461

Ruth: But the interesting thing is that           462
        nobody has ever come in and taken          463
        their job.                                 464
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Glossing. Story performances can involve what Weick (1981) called extended glosses ("Let me tell you that piece of the story!") to sell a particular point of view. In S3, Ruth is obviously using the story of Raymond Smith as a gloss to push her point of view, but so is Kora in her gloss (lines 456-461) on Ruth's story. A story gloss is a brief retelling of a piece of a story so that the referent experience becomes sensible in new ways after having been glossed. The gloss is akin to marginal notes or digression that can exaggerate, simplify, and shift the meaning of the experience. Storytellers might use a gloss as an occasion to accentuate an anomalous experience as an integral aspect of the founding, maturity, reform, or demise of an organization. Additional examples of gloss can be seen even more clearly in the next example.

The series of stories. The CEO and several vice presidents participate in a strategic planning session during which Harmon asks a question to which Doug reconstructs a story line (341-3) and then once again invites Sam to gloss one aspect of the story (338-9). Sam's gloss (347-50) is itself a second story. Everyone there knows the terse telling to be the same story that I discovered in cross-indexed transcripts and in interviews of when, for example, printing orders fell out of the back of a delivery truck and were scattered across the highway. Others in the group follow this with more talk, and a third story is initiated (359-60). This third story is a personal-experience narrative and has more credibility than second-hand accounts. The first story, by contrast, does not arise out of personal experience. In fact, Doug did not become CEO of this firm until after the incident in question. He, instead, builds on the acknowledged experience of Sam, who has been at Gold for 12 years. According to follow-up interviews, Doug, unlike former CEOs, had an ability to draw historical precedent into his own performance that made him an effective agent of change at Gold. His reference to "Epsilon" in line 342 is part of a story that was being recounted every time several executives, vendors, or large customers gathered (see S6, S8, S9, S10, and S11 in Table 1, above).

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S4: Printing Was Different Story

Harmon: But is that the most effective way    335
        to do it? Do they hit the same places?  336

Doug:   Historically, in reading a little       337
        bit of the history and maybe Sam         338
        can help us out here. The printing       339
        business that we were writing was        340
        significant at one time and when the     341
        folks left for Epsilon they took that    342
        business with them and now we're going   343
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              through a whole retraining process          344

Sam:    Well that could be so I mean                      345
        printing again falls with the                     346
        salesmen. A lot of the salesmen will              347
        not sell printing because they are                348
        afraid that the printing department,              349
        as in the past, has fouled up                     350

Kora:   Vickie has been wonderful                         351

Sam:    Yes I think Vickie has been                       352
        wonderful. It is a matter of                      353
        confidence in whoever it is there.                354
        When John Rifler was in charge of it              355
        there was no confidence. This goes on             356
        and it changes                                    357

Ruth:   And I think training comes in here                358

Jim:    When I was in sales I sold what  I                359
        understood. If I didn't understand * * *          360
```

Series of stories as an enactment of change. Storytelling is a way to draw parallels between two patterns. In the following segment, the new CEO glosses, in a storytelling, to reveal how his experience from other companies relates to what one vice president is telling him (1415-26, 1450-9). Follow-up interviews revealed that his story performance is a scenario told to introduce a strategic shift in the focus of this firm. His ability to enact a performance that coaxes his executives to identify with his relevant experiences in analogous situations gives his scenario for change a good deal of credibility. The executives are beginning to buy into the future scenario. To implement this change, several divisions will be put on the block so Gold can focus on its main business (1474-9). There are elements of reform, blood-letting (firings), and death (selling off divisions) as the new pattern becomes envisioned in this story.

```
S5: Industry Stories

Jim:  Wait a minute I gotta put one more                  1415
      point into here, since Ben C. isn't                 1416
      here. Because sales is not represented              1417
      in this whole group and it's really                 1418
      unfortunate. Based on the fact, cause               1419
      I've talked to the people. You've got               1420
      Victor M. who has a sales assistant                 1421
      that he shares with somebody. He's                  1422
      doing a 150 thousand dollars a month                1423
      in office supplies an some furniture.               1424
      How much more can we expect out of                  1425
      him?                                                1426

Doug: Looking at acquisitions and mergers                 1427
      in our industry, and I've been through              1428
      four or five of em, disaster hits. And              1429
      I'll give you examples Gamma                         1430
```

```
        Corporation. l was with the old          1431
        Delphi Company and it's nonexistent       1432
        today. They merged with Alpha. And        1433
        then they merged with Parrot. All the     1434
        same ownership and so on. Clearly the     1435
        sales force was on overload. Couldn't     1436
        handle it and a lot of things fell        1437
        through the cracks. l can give you        1438
        similar examples with Juindon. I          1439
        can go right down the list. There is a    1440
        point--where the economies that you       1441
        pick up trying to consolidate             1442
        businesses with one sales force uhhh      1443
        they are far overridden by what you       1444
        lose in the translation. So there is a    1445
        point Jim but I don't know where the      1446
        hell it is/                               1447

Jim:    And that's my point/.                     1448

Doug:   And it's got to be easy because I         1449
        experienced it as a salesman. What I      1450
        found was that the more they dumped on    1451
        me, where there was duplication and       1452
        there was overlap and so on. It was       1453
        still writing instruments and you         1454
        would think that would be an easy         1455
        deal. You are still selling writing       1456
        instruments, but you got all this shit    1457
        and you only got so much time in front    1458
        of a customer. You got so much            1459
        communication time you got so much        1460
        I seriously question whether if you       1461
        are in the contract business I really     1462
        question if you can effectively call      1463
        on other people in the organization to    1464
        accomplish something. I really            1465
        question that. And it's a question        1466
        not a decision and not a                  1467
        determination. But Ad Specialty           1468
        clearly a different buyer Furniture is    1469
        clearly a different buyer clearly [* * *] 1470

Ruth:   [* * *] the other thing, Doug, is can we  1474
        be successful? Our main throw is          1475
        office products. Can we be successful     1476
        without having these sidelines?           1477

Doug:   Absolutely!                               1478

Ruth:   Are you sure? Screw [Furniture]! Forget   1479
        Goldco!                                   1480

Kora:   And printing!                             1481

Doug:   I said it rather flippantly earlier,      1482
        but I'm very serious we could skim off    1483
```

```
30,40 million dollars and no one              1484
would even know we are there. We don't        1485
have to take it away from a                   1486
competitor, the market is expanding so        1487
dramatically/                                 1488
```

Executives accepted the blood-letting scenario as a necessary evil to save the organization and even the affected managers typically describe Doug as a "savior."

For example, one story that was repeated in many office conversations concerns how, upon Doug's arrival as the new CEO, a non-gone executive tried to implement reserved parking privileges for executives. 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. For Gold, this is a relatively new story, since Doug is the latest CEO. A year from now this might be tersely referred to as the parking-sign story.

Story performance as sense making. In the following example an analysis of the story is embedded in the telling. The analysis consists of telling the story to make sense of the environment as sense is made of the story performance. While middle management has survived five CEOs in two years by ignoring most change efforts, the salespeople avoid change by not giving upper management access to their customers. It is a power play similar to the one Crozier (1964) described in his classic study of maintenance mechanics making the tobacco factories dependent on them by blocking access to maintenance manuals and making unique modifications to the machines. Since the "wars" with a major competitor, "Epsilon," Gold executives are concerned about access to their top accounts.

In lines 846-54, the story details are so terse that, at first glance, there may not appear to be a story at all. However, in lines 855-6, another executive hooks into the underlying experience to trigger more detail on the story behind the story. In 859-62, the story of a salesperson's reaction to executive attempts to implement computer information-system controls garners a severe group reaction. In line 870, Doug uses a very common reflexive "you know" to reference experience that the other executives are expected to fill in between the lines. He references a story everyone knows all too well. In line 870, the use of an extended pause following the emphasized word "too" is a language tactic that invites hearers to fill in their knowledge of the story behind the performed story. "Tool" references former attempts by the "corner office" to make salesmen's accounts become house accounts. These executives have confided to me that to change the balance of power between themselves and their salespeople, they will need to tread lightly or risk triggering another exodus of their salespeople to their competitor, Epsilon. In the following excerpt, the group has been discussing how difficult it is going to be to put together something as seemingly simple as a customer focus group because of this issue.

```
S6: Sales Meeting Story

Dave: Why is that?                              842

Kora: That organism that mechanism is not      843
      in place. It's just in the very first    844
      throws of it                             845

Doug: The insulation that we have from our     846
      customers is mind boggling. I should     847
      be able to pick up the phone and call    848
      10 or 12 close friends that happen to    849
      be customers and get em down here        850
      with no problem. Our salespeople         851
      will not let us near them. I             852
      shouldn't say won't let us/ (several     853
      talk at once)/                           854

Jim:  What's been the response to your plea    855
      at the sales meeting?                    856

Doug: A couple people that are secure have     857
      come to me and said "let's do this,      858
      this and this." But then I hear          859
      comments from Jim T. who says 'umm,      860
      tell me about our data processing and    861
      our terminal hook up                     862

Ruth: Oh boy!                                  863

Doug: And I says "Why do you ask?" Well I      864
      was thinking, if I put one of those      865
      terminals in you don't need me as        866
      much as uhhh                             867

Kora: Oh God! (Lots of expression by everyone) 868

Doug: And I said Jeff it's a tool God Damn     869
      it! (3.0) And you know/ [* * *]          870
Kora: Our customers are gold you know that/    880
      (much cross-talk) /We want all of our ducks  881
      in line and all of our logistics so that when  882
      they walk in they are treated. The red carpet  883
      is out[***]                             884
```

The turnover story as prediction. As with the executive committee, the organization stories in the following excerpts from vendor and customer focus-group videotapes extend from the observed pattern of past events (337-44) to a prediction of a probable future pattern (356-64). As Martin (1982: 287) suggested, the script embedded in the story, though unstated, allows people to predict what may happen if a similar incident should recur: "A story contains a blueprint that can be used to predict future organizational behavior." What is interesting is that the vendors leave most of the script unstated in their terse telling of the story.

```
S7: CEO Turnover Story

Dan: Yeah, my boss will call from                       337
     We're based out of the Northwest and              338
     he'll say "Well Dan who is running the            339
     ship at Gold now?" He can see a                   340
     lot of the proposals that we've                   341
     presented and were accepted six months           342
     ago still in effect because there's               343
     been turnover[***]                                344
     You know is the next administration               356
     going to come in and make changes to              357
     that? One point that Jeff made                    358
     earlier that I want to touch on is our            359
     concerns are shared with their                    360
     salespeople. They definitely know                 361
     sometimes that they're kind of a ship             362
     without a rudder right now and I think            363
     it concerns their salespeople as well             364
```

Relationships with vendors and contract customers are important interorganizational relationships for Gold. In this next excerpt, from a customer focus group, the turnover in CEOs, as well as new vice presidents, and sales managers, has resulted in problems of stability and access in Gold's relations. Storytelling about the shakeup at Gold helps customers and vendors paint a predictable scenario. In the following excerpt, the story's blueprint is quite terse (347-9,957-66). Pinning this blueprint down takes 22 minutes of the focus group's time.

```
S8: A Customer Story

Frank: And I'm seeing symptoms of the                  342
       turnover in senior management they              343
       have had senior management that they            344
       have had in the past 14-15 months               345
       where they have had a change in                 346
       philosophy. A certain president has             347
       own stamp of how he is going to operate         348
       and things change. My major concern is          349
       the end result. l don't care how they           350
       resolve their internal politics                 351
       I need the product                              352
       [***] They do listen but with half an           954
       ear maybe because of the change in              955
       management.                                     956
       Certain management we have had                  957
       discussions and we have come to agreements      958
       and the systems have been worked               959
       out. New management comes in a new              960
       president of the company and we have to         961
       reinvent the wheel and we go back and I         962
       mean it's in writing it's documented            963
       these agreements are documented and then        964
       go to the next person                           965
```

The word on the street story. During the study, the conglomerate decided to sell Gold, and the news leaked. In this videotaped focus group exchange, I assume line 370 represents a plea from these vendors to be able to tell the story (370), since it is followed by three "you know" references (377,379,388-9) to the fuller story that the vendors know but do not expect outsiders to know. The vendors perform a futuristic scenario that they use to make sense of Gold's behavior. It is reinforced and embellished by glosses by other vendors (not included). The scenario in 381-9 has not happened at Gold, but it is a plot sequence that has occurred with regularity in the vendor's other relationships. Referencing how the story has been leaked by Gold's salespeople (388-9) adds credibility to the performance.

```
S9: Word on the Street Story

Sid: Well if we can just be open/                      370
     (simultaneous talking of 4 people) /the           371
     word is on the street that they are up             372
     for sale OK? So now you know [CEO]                 373
     may be the president. They may want                374
     him up there. But somebody'll buy him              375
     next month and then he's going to be               376
     gone because you know, because you                 377
     know they're bringing in their own                 378
     people. You don't know I mean . . . You            379
     don't want that I mean personally I                380
     think he's going to be a good                      381
     administrator, but then he is but                  382
     then somebody buys him and they have               383
     their own people then maybe he's not               384
     going to be there so you wonder is                 385
     there going to be a stability? And                 386
     the salesmen have the same concern and             387
     I heard it from them themselves you                388
     know. What's going to where we                     389
     going?                                             390
```

Alternative glossing. People perform stories about their struggles for survival, and the story can change depending on the stakeholders performing the story. Throughout this study, in talking to Gold employees, vendors, and customers, stories about the wars with Epsilon were a frequent topic. In the first excerpt, a sales manager, during a lunch at a crowded restaurant, gave me a concise version of the Epsilon War Story that captured most of the plot. Some 9 to 12 salespeople (the count depends on to whom you talk) were recruited by a competitor. In retaliation, Gold recruited some of their salespeople. Customers were traded back and forth, and, in the process, some exorbitant guarantees were given out to salespeople. The sales manager's gloss paints salespeople as the prima donnas who initiated the war. Doug's version (not shown), in contrast, stressed the "tremendous exposure with salespeople leaving and dragging accounts back and forth." This is very much a political use of storytelling, as various factions in and around the organization seek to establish an advantageous interpretation.

```
S10: Epsilon War Story: Version I
```

```
Ralph: The Epsilon Wars . . . bad way to do          2597
       it really silly. We just traded sales         2598
       people and now we're both stuck with          2599
       salespeople with giant guarantees and         2600
       it's hurting our bottom line in a major       2601
       way 9 of the 11 were prima donnas             2602
       pain in the ass egotistical to the            2603
       max. Developed by [Raymond] in the            2604
       many years of the Gold philosophy             2605
       The salesman is king                          2606
```

In the vendor focus group, another version of the story was recounted. In this story performance, the group uses storytelling to ascertain the probability that Gold's sales force is once again at risk of being captured by Epsilon and, along with the sales force, their precious accounts. The vendors attribute the trigger for the next war to the fact that Gold has undergone far too much instability: five CEOs in two years, the company being put up for sale by its conglomerate holding company, and competitors that, sensing what was going on, had exploited the situation to the net disadvantage of Gold.

```
S11: Epsilon War Story: Version II

Bob:    They have lost a lot of accounts/           448

Ron:    What do/ you attribute that to?             449

Sid:    That is specific to sometime in 1988        450
        They lost several of their many of          451
        their key reps to another distributor       452
        /(Group goes back and forth) /Didn't        453
        they drop 10- 12 or something like          454
        that?                                       455
Ron:    Is there a word on the street as to         456
        why these people left?                      457

Ted:    I think the instability of the              458
        company and they probably lured them        459
        over action/(Several talk at once)/         460

Oscar: I think their competitor used the            461
        instability factor to put doubts in         462
        the minds of those people and it was        463
        an opportune time. They have been           464
        battled several times. This is an           465
        opportune time to steal some people if      466
        you will and hopefully their major          467
        accounts with them and they took            468
        advantage of the situation. That is         469
        one of the tough things in business         470
```

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

By focusing on in situ everyday performance behavior, this study showed how storytelling goes on more frequently and differently than might have been suspected in

previous storytelling studies. As critics will be quick to point out, however, just being able to isolate and identify terse storytelling and glossing in various story performance forms in use among organization stakeholders is insufficient justification to call for an integration of the story-as-texts and stories-as-performance approaches to story research. But there are several observations that strengthen this position. First, it is not the fact that the story is terse and abbreviated that counts; it is the fact that the teller picks one aspect to abbreviate ("You know the rest of the story.") and another to accentuate ("It's the same old story, except this time we found them together."). This, along with gloss, is an essential surface mechanism by which stories are performed. Second, part of storytelling involves managing the telling of a story by being able to weave it into on-going conversation. Both teller and listener are sending cues to manage how much of the story is told, how much is left to the imagination, and what interpretation is applied. This also is management of sense making. Third, terse telling can be a power strategy of purposeful mystification (Fisher, 1984) or tactical ambiguity. The CEO, Doug, used his storytelling to draw in the other executives to accept his reform strategies as their own. As Eisenberg (1984: 236) observed, "It is often preferable to omit purposefully contextual cues and to allow for multiple interpretations on the part of receivers."

These stakeholders tune into stories as real-time data and tell stories to predict, empower, and even fashion change. Customers, vendors, salespeople, and executives in this office-supply distribution company performed stories not only to make sense of their setting but to negotiate alternative interpretations and to accommodate new precedents for decision and action. They tell stories about the past, present, and future to make sense of and manage their struggles with their environment.

This study raises a number of important questions. Does story performance occur more frequently in some types of organizations more than in others? Was storytelling performance in this organization, for example, biased by the turbulence of a rapid succession of CEOs, the need to eliminate divisions, the war with a dominant competitor, and being traded between conglomerates? Peters and Austin (1985: 330) hypothesized that storytelling is more frequent in turbulent settings, where stories and interpretations are shared with great frequency to understand the unfolding dynamics. Familiarity with those dynamics, however, should result in a familiarized way of recounting terser stories, with glosses only used to highlight deviations. Once a story pattern is seen again and again, for example, in law enforcement, emergency work, and wartime situation rooms, one might expect typical scenarios to become reduced to terse response codes. Similarly, one might expect to see fuller story texts performed in newer organizations, in which there is less shared experience. There are implicit rules in storytelling (who can tell it, to whom, and where). Further research can examine what happens, if anything, when these rules are broken, when the telling is done inappropriately.

There is a broader implication of management education evident in the storytelling-performance paradigm. People who are more skilled as storytellers and story interpreters seem to be more effective communicators than those who are less skilled (Boje, 1989, 1991). Yet, until recently, teaching storytelling skills, outside of the folklore discipline, has been limited to the teaching of children (Zemke, 1990; Boje, 1991). As organizational

boundaries become more permeable and the organization structure flatter, requiring more networking and communication skills, storytelling can be a useful tool for managers trying to cope with rapid change. Training managers to be storytellers may thus result in training them to be more effective in organizations.

The most important implication for organization study that was born out of the present study is that story researchers can benefit by entering organizations to observe first-hand how people perform storytelling. The focus in traditional organization story research has been on texts taken from a range of isolated, often anomalous stories plucked out of their natural setting. These studies ignore performance and streamline the stories or treat them as so many variables that can give empirical explanations of the organization. The storytelling organization theory posits story text and performance as two sides of the same coin and gives us insight into the complex and varied ways organization members use storytelling in their work world.

```
Table 1
Varieties of Story-line Patterns
```

Story Title	Source	Story-line pattern	Tellers
1. Goldco Founding	Past event	Pattern is no longer financially sound.	Execs
2. Reno Branch	Past event	Pattern is no longer ethical.	Execs
3. Hire No One Better	Past event	Pattern is still going on.	Execs
4. Printing Was Different	Past event	Pattern has improved for them.	Execs
5. Industry	Past event	Pattern is same in that part of the industry.	Execs
6. Sales Meeting	Current event	Pattern that got evoked is not one we wanted.	Execs
7. CEO Turnover	Past event	Pattern will repeat itself and then where are we?	Vendors
8. Customer	Current event	Pattern unacceptable to us customers.	Customers
9. Word on the Street	Current event	Pattern is likely to repeat.	Vendors
10. Epsilon Version I	Past event	Pattern is likely to repeat.	Salespeople
11. Epsilon Version II	Past event	Pattern is likely to repeat.	Vendors

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