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Finding a Space for Story: Sensemaking, Stories and Epistemic Impasse

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ABSTRACT

The current study explores the role of stories in organizational sensemaking processes. Rather than positioning stories as one among many different sensemaking mechanisms, it is argued that stories allow a particular kind of sensemaking that is inherently open-ended, distinguishing it from theoretical and propositional explanations for organizational phenomena. Drawing on previous Foucaultian discussions of *epistemes*, I introduce the notions of *epistemic impasse* and *epistemic spillover*, arguing that cross-functional interaction can cause tensions between incompatible epistemic bases, and that stories can act as a mechanism to overcome such tensions. I illustrate this mechanism in an ethnographic, participant-observer study of a university student-support center, showing how storytelling led to an increasingly open although ultimately totalizing tendency within the center, thus demonstrating both the potentials and limits of using stories within organizations.

Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language?" Foucault, 1970, p. 9

Sensemaking in organizations often takes the form of stories or narratives (e.g. Brown, Stacey & Nadhakumar, 2008; Currie & Brown, 2008; Boje, 2001), and contributes to processes of organizational symbolization and framing that allow individuals to create a sense of group identity (e.g. Reid & West, 2011; Del Corso & Rehfuss, 2010). Narrative is a principal form by which ambiguous environments are given structure and form in organizations (e.g. Simpson, 2008; Brown, 2008), and arise out of individuals storytelling practices (e.g. Boje, 2001). Through the stories they tell, organizational members put order into the chaotic flux of organizational life, and give their present actions significance by placing them in an unfolding narrative.

However, sensemaking logics can threaten as well as reinforce institutional structures (e.g. Deroy & Clegg, 2011), and unlike the imposed coherence of institutionalized narratives (e.g. Boje, 2001), people's stories can loosen ties, creating spaces of ambiguity within which contradicting paradigms can co-exist. The ways in which stories represent information make them open-ended and particularly useful for social-cognitive repair work when common understandings are unlikely to emerge.

To develop this point, this paper draws on O'Leary & Chia's (2007) important introduction of *epistemes* to the organizational sensemaking literature, to explore the dynamic relationships between stories and competing institutional frameworks. Epistemes are collective codes that "orient our material disposition toward the world" (p. 393), connecting the micro-processes of sensemaking activities with macro-level social structures of meaning. The current work extends this perspective, arguing that although

stories can embody epistemes, they can also break free of and drift between diverse epistemes. To specify and elaborate such possibilities, I will introduce the notions of *epistemic impasse* and *epistemic spillover*, arguing that stories play a crucial role in the negotiation between epistemes.

Among the different forms of sensemaking, stories are unique because of their simultaneous ability to structure organizational environments and preserve the indeterminacy of environments *as lived experience* (Arendt, 1968a). While theoretical discourse furthers the first goal, it falls short of the second by subordinating the particularity of events to abstract categories (e.g. Marcus, 1986). By refocusing attention on the particularity of social actors as the ground of sensemaking processes, I hope to reveal sensemaking as more than an epistemic process of categorizing organizational life, but as a practical act of organizational living. This turn to practice (Marcus, 1986), I argue, best embodies the spirit of Weick's (1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) original concept, and reconceives of "sense" in a conceptually rich way.

To demonstrate the simultaneous capability of stories to provide sense and loosen theoretical rigidities, I describe the results of an ethnographic, participant-observer study of a university Student Services Center (referred to in this paper as the Center) in the process of transformation. The Center, composed of career specialists, a clinical psychologist, and members of a university disciplinary committee, became the site for profuse organizational storytelling on the part of group members, in a struggle to both define and expand the university's position on student deviant behavior. The friction between diverse professional conceptions of deviance, and their use of story to carve out new institutional spaces by negotiating among these differences, made this site

particularly illustrative. The attempt to preserve this storytelling space in the face of organizational demands adds a further dimension to this story.

In this article, I first discuss the notions of episteme and storytelling, exploring the relationship between the two. Next, I present details from an ethnographic study, showing how stories both nourished and escaped from the bureaucratic and epistemic structures in service of which they were deployed. Finally, I draw out the implications of the study for the sensemaking literature, and argue that an “extended” view of sense can uniquely position the sensemaking literature within organizational studies more generally.

EPISTEMES AND SENSEMAKING

Foucault (1970) introduced the notion of episteme as an a priori, pre-conscious ground of knowledge underlying the discursive production of practices of an era. Similar to Kuhn’s (1962) notion of paradigms, epistemes are more expansive in structuring not only scientific discourse, but also everyday assumptions of social actors, providing an “apparatus” which grounds human interactions and provides limits for thinking and speaking (Eagleton, 1994). Rather than simply cultural beliefs, or knowledge propositions per se, Foucault (1970) views epistemes as sets of practical relations, laying the groundwork for subsequent formulations of thinking and talking about the world.

In its original, more deterministic structuralist formulation (Foucault, 1970), epistemes were epochal, macro structures that unify virtually all knowledge in an historical age. Using a genealogical approach, he traced changing epistemes through disciplinary, therapeutic, and self-care conceptions of the human, where each conceptions involved correlated concrete institutions and governance practices. The idea of creating subjectivity through punishment versus therapy, for example, involved not only a

comparison of the efficacy of the two, but a reconception of what constituted a human being, and the political and social structures necessary to reproduce such conceptions.

Later, however, Foucault reworked his conception of epistemes (e.g. MacClean, 1998), retaining the notion of episteme but recognizing the possibility of competing epistemes within an epoch (Foucault, 1972). In this view, a unified Classical episteme historically gave way to a split in the modern age, producing a fragmented human sciences with isolated disciplinary discourses that were potentially irreconcilable (e.g. Fleming, 1995). With the possibility of co-existing and mutually competing epistemes in the modern epoch, Foucault goes as far as to recognize that hybrid discourses and new knowledge have resulted from moments of “analogies between epistemes” (Payne, 1997, p 46). Later uses of the episteme concept also emphasize their coexistence within a particular epoch, for example, when Barthes (1980) refers to competing Marxist and Psychoanalytical epistemes within textual interpretation. Because the site of the current study involves the same three macro-standpoints that Foucault holds up for analysis – disciplinary, therapeutic, and self-care models – it is a particularly useful site in which to explore the possibility and dynamics of co-existing epistemes.

The possibility of multiple co-existing epistemes is important because it can give rise to what I term *epistemic impasses*. Epistemic impasses occur when similar or related experiential phenomena are epistemically framed in incompatible ways. This is not to say that the same object is treated differently, since the object concept itself is constructed through the articulatory mechanisms of the episteme. However, when phenomena are framed through the epistemic lenses of different institutional structures, disagreements can arise not about the appropriate actions to take regarding the objects of discussion, but

regarding the very constitution or composition of those objects themselves. Thus, disagreements arise not because of empirical disagreements about objects of discourse, but about the very terms of the debate in the first place. Importantly for the current study, the inability to fix terms should lead to a difficulty in articulating and communicating differences, leading to a search for alternative forms of articulation.

To illustrate the notion of impasse, Townley (1993), using a Foucaultian analysis to describe Human Resource Management, argues that personnel techniques impose epistemic criteria onto human behavior by using graded scales, ranked according to performance metrics. Such techniques simultaneously construct human beings as social agents and as capital assets. This human capital view of work may be at impasse with views of work as personal realization or dignity (e.g. Borman, 2009; Sayer, 2007), in which work provides mechanism by which the worker fulfills internal needs for self-actualization. Epistemic impasse can occur even if the worker is engaged, in both cases, in the same set of concrete behaviors; these behaviors offer adequate material for *both* efficiency-ranking and self-actualization explanations, which articulate the as-yet-undefined activity according to different basic schema. Thus, disagreements cannot refer to empirical evidence to resolve their disagreements, since what is “evident” itself depends on how each episteme configures the phenomenal field.

In a second example, Barton (1999) considers the possibility of negotiating between psychotherapeutic and juridical models of human behavior in constructing a “therapeutic jurisprudence”. Recognizing that legal-disciplinary ways of interpreting deviant behavior are based in, and reinforce, antagonistic interpersonal relations based on dominance relations, Barton speculates on the prospects of introducing “therapeutic”

values into the legal institutional field, emphasizing accommodation and tolerance for difference. While stressing that such values might reframe social relations in beneficial ways, he concludes that the institutional and professional structures of the law often block such possibilities for re-thinking a field.

In both of these examples, we are faced with “power-knowledge” combinations that are Foucaultian (e.g. Foucault, 1980), involving not only interpretations of organizational topics, but power structures that work to constrain such interpretations. Changing epistemes, in both examples, is not just psychological and individual, but involves straining the bureaucratic norms that define interactions. However, both examples also demonstrate a second principle, that interpretations always imperfectly characterize the individuals within organizations, that each episteme cannot fully contain the phenomena onto which it overlays its cognitive-institutional framework. This inadequacy of epistemes to fully “capture” their phenomena, I refer to as *epistemic spillover*.

Epistemic spillover occurs when individuals recognize the inability of their categories to capture the polyvalence of their referents. It involves recognizing the inadequacy of simple categorization to capture the richness of experienced phenomena. Such recognition is tied to epistemic impasse, in that it is precisely in situations of impasse where the world seems to lie beyond the interpretative possibilities of a particular episteme. Absent impasse, it is difficult to imagine how actors could become aware of such limitations. Recognizing the inherent openness of experience creates a “crisis of meaning” (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1995) and a search for assimilative or accommodative solutions. However, the sense making strategies of expanding an existing

episteme, or switching epistemes, simply reproduce the spillover at a different level. Alternatively, by broadening the idea of “sense” to somehow allow representations of extra-epistemic elements, actors may be able to find ways of dealing with epistemic spillover.

Introducing the notions of *epistemic impasse* and *epistemic spillover* can offer, I argue, a conceptual contribution to the sensemaking literature, because it is precisely within the interstices of signification systems that sense seeking may occur. Literature in the sensemaking area has established that sense seeking behaviors may result from “crises of meaning” that accompany organizational change (e.g. Berger & Luckmann, 1995; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007) and that symbolic work often accompanies situations where contradictory messages are articulated simultaneously (Islam & Zyphur, 2009). Because organizational life increasingly relies on cross-functional structures that may juxtapose different epistemes (e.g. Stone, 2002; Keller, 2001), we may expect these types of contradictions to multiply in contemporary organizations. Because, within epistemes, actors construct “facts” about the world in which they live, the perception of epistemic impasse should produce a crisis of meaning, throwing into doubt the certainty of the categories of everyday life. Additionally, because epistemes are more than mere cognitions, but involve the basic social relations around which interactions are structured, epistemic impasses involve institutional as well as cognitive crises, exacerbating the need for resolution. However, the fact that the very means for articulating solutions to epistemic problems are themselves products of these epistemes may make such resolutions seem intractable. Thus, the question of epistemic

impasse involves a question of how sense can be made of a situation in which the symbolic apparatus needed for resolving the impasse is inadequate or missing.

However, such difficulties may not be intractable because of the very fact that actors are able to perceive them in the first place. The concept of epistemic spillover refers to such possibilities of seeing beyond an epistemic boundary, not the seeing of clear alternatives but that of diffuse projections of possibilities missing from the current order (e.g. Mische, 2009). The fact that people do encounter radical crises of meaning means that epistemes are not totally determining of worldviews, a fact that Foucault himself (e.g. 1972) admitted. The dynamic aspect of sensemaking implies that people actively attempt to find creative solutions to problems of meaning, mixing and matching symbolic resources from different epistemes, as well as innovating new approaches to representation, to create hybrid solutions to epistemic problems.

In the next section, I will argue that stories can provide a source for such solutions, and can mediate the cognitive-institutional structures that clash in situations of epistemic impasse. Although stories are certainly structured (e.g. Gabriel 2000), and have been used to create closed social orders and fix meanings when they are abstracted into formalized narrative structures (e.g. Boje, 2001; White, 1980), I will argue stories differ from other forms of representation in ways that allow for spillover while allowing sensemaking to occur.

EPISTEMIC SPILLOVER AND THE ROLE OF STORIES

Recent work in the sensemaking literature has turned to story and narrative as a foundation for sensemaking processes (e.g. Brown, Stacey & Nandhakumar, 2008). In this view, narratives generate structures of equivalence among organizational members to

provide a foundation for common action. While Brown et al. (2008) stress that many organizational meanings are not-shared, narrative structures provide an important basis for convergence, echoing some views in the narrative literature (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 2000) that stories are essentially structuration mechanisms ordering the world through plot lines and similar structural qualities. Bruner (1990), for example, views stories as a source of life's coherence, and influence the creation of shared cultural expectations. By contrast, some (e.g. Boje, 2006; Barry & Elms, 1997) stress the fragmentedness, fluidity and partiality of stories as essentially "polyphonic" (Bakhtin, 1981). Drawing on Bakhtin's (e.g. 1981) foundational work, stories do not only shutter in an otherwise multivocal world, but are themselves multivocal, and contain the potential to undo narrative coherence. Bakhtin (e.g. 1973), critiquing "monological" approaches to narrative, proposed instead a "polyphonic" perspective, that influenced organizational storytelling perspectives. Most notably, Boje's (e.g. 2001) work on antenarrative, seems to recognize narratives' role in maintaining order, and story's potential for emancipation from established orders, overwhelming narrative's power to contain its content.

To understand how stories and narrative provide a basis for sensemaking, it is necessary to understand a.) How the drive to "sense" can be understood as more than a search for order or closure, and b.) How stories, while often harnessed to the urge to give accounts in an essentially fragmented world (e.g. Bruner, 1990), and produce order and rationality (e.g. Czarniawska, 1997), can also attend to the establishment of wider notions of "sense".

Regarding the first point, understanding why people tell stories involves recognizing that sensemaking does not simply involve categorizing, reifying, or taxonomizing oneself or one's organizational experiences, but also integrating these experiences into a collectively shared *lifeworld* (Arendt, 1968a) in which behavior is experienced as socially meaningful *action* and facts can be experienced as *events*. The distinction between the mere factual and behavioral component of collective life, and its human component as event and action, was described by Arendt in the following terms:

“The chief characteristic of this specifically human life, whose appearance and disappearance constitute worldly events, is that it is itself always full of events which ultimately can be told as a story, establish a biography” (Arendt 1968a, p 97)

Arendt provides a key conceptual pillar to this argument because of her unique theoretical background, combining a focus on lived, meaningful experience drawn from phenomenology with an interest, drawn from Walter Benjamin (Arendt, 1968b), in how cultural fragments are used in bricolage-like fashion to create collective memories (Benhabib, 1996). In this way, Arendt was able to imagine both the heterogeneity and multivocality of narrated events (see also Bakhtin, 1981, on the multivocality of story) and their orientation towards meaning, life-relevance, and defiance in the face of oblivion (Arendt, 1968c).

But what is that makes stories multivocal, able to capture the heterogeneity of lived experience in a way that theoretical categories cannot? Stories' potential may relate to their unique way of relating the particular and the universal. This relation, explained as a kind of “grounding” by Arendt, involves the mimetic (e.g. Adorno, 1984) aspect of stories, in which general principles are recreated through the particulars of a story.

Because theoretical rationality subordinates particular facts to general principles, as mere exemplars of principles (e.g. Whewell, 1989), there is always a gap between the general and the particular. This gap is often dismissed as irrational, and theory “hides and disavows precisely this irrationality” (Adorno, 1984, p 79). Mimetic representation, on the other hand, returns to the particular, reemphasizing the phenomena’s singularity, rather than its subordination to a principle or rule. While Adorno applied this point to art in general, it is evident how it applies to stories; Stories are about *someone*, in a particular time and place, and any general rule drawn from a story only comes into play to the extent that it makes itself manifest in *this* time, at *that* place. As a mode of discourse, stories are thus more open than theoretical or practical discourses. Representing more than the institutional-epistemic structure of a rule, they present the lived experiences of individuals within the context of a structuring environment. It is thus the representation of epistemic spillover itself that distinguishes stories from theory, as well as from the more formalistic approaches to narrative that generalize from lived experiences (e.g. Jorgensen & Boje, 2010).

Stories thus fit within a broadened notion of sense-making as not only the creation of order out of disorder, but also the potential of the inevitably disorderly aspects of human life to become represented themselves. Stories do this via an assortment of textual elements, for example, representing particularities instead of general formal relations (such as hypotheses), representing conflicts without the necessity for narrative resolution, allowing for a plurality of different worldviews by structuring stories around different voices or characters. By leaving theorization aside, stories provide a “sense” to the world’s incompleteness that theory treats as error or imperfection. Thus story, by not

claiming formal truth but only allegorical representation, allows for sensemaking possibilities that literal explanation cannot provide.

By requiring sense to be understood as holistic, lived, and interpretively open, stories make sense of the world while allowing multiple epistemes to “inhabit” a particular story. This makes stories ideal for situations where epistemic impasse results from conceptual and institutional friction.

As a mode of discourse, stories differ from closed narratives, as well as theoretical or practical discourses, in that they do not hide the unexplainable aspects that such discourses attempt to repress, as described above. They thus are able to represent epistemic spillover, and are not paralyzed by epistemic impasses. They gain this versatility, however, by remaining unable to “close” explanations, and thus may be difficult to convert into forms of institutional practice or theoretical explanation. The current case study attempts to illustrate both this openness and its consequent limitation.

Below, I explore the question “how do stories negotiate epistemic impasses, and can the epistemic openness of stories resist closure in the face of institutional constraints?” The ethnographic case study presented below was chosen for its unique juxtaposition of different epistemes. This over-arching interest was narrowed into the specific storytelling practices during the course of the study through the grounding practice of “theoretical sampling” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) where cases are chosen at an early stage based on theoretical constructs, which is in turn modified based on observations, iteratively (Hughes & Sharrock, 2002). The prevalence of sensemaking via stories by an organizational group, as a departmental strategy to deal with epistemic

impasse, emerged as a theme during the course of the research. The site, procedure and results are discussed below.

METHOD

As an ethnographic participant-observer study (e.g. Fetterman, 2008), I was involved as an invited observer and eventual participant in a nascent student-support service unit over the course of approximately 1 year, beginning from the initial planning phase for the unit. More specifically, the method is closer to “para-ethnography” (e.g. Holmes & Marcus, 2008. Holmes & Marcus, 2006), a form of ethnography in which the observed subjects are also self-consciously reflecting on their own cultural dynamics, and thus particularly relevant to the study of managers. The current study is para-ethnographic in that it takes as its subject population a group that cross-cuts traditional culture groups, and whose members are reflexively engaged in the formation of new cultural configurations (Holmes & Marcus, 2008). My own eventual occasional participation in discussions, consultation and feedback also lends an autoethnographic quality to the method (e.g. Harra & Phillips, 2007; Hayano, 1979), although I was not a source of stories about the operation, and thus remain aloof from the storytelling dynamics described below.

The study took place in a private business school in Brazil, within the context of an inter-departmental student-services project. The project involved collaboration between career services, academic discipline, and counseling units, the latter established specifically for the project. The project objective was to “divide” career services into “career development” and “personal development” sub-divisions, identifying and clarifying the latter’s objectives. While the institutional location of the new “personal

development” division was within career services, it had grown out of an initiative emanating from the disciplinary division, and attempted to provide a holistic view of student development combining educational, personal/ethical, and professional components. Once this holistic vision had been identified as strategically important, it was the project committee’s task to create the appropriate structure. Although not a member of the committee, I was informed of the site because of the unique psychological and social factors involved, and was asked to give an informal feedback role. Because the conceptual and institutional boundaries of this initiative were still in flux, I was welcomed in the research role of participant-observer in exchange for discussion and ideas regarding the emerging unit.

Data Collection and Analytic Procedure

The study data consisted of ethnographic field notes collected at weekly meetings occurring over 10 months and unstructured interviews with each member of the group. However, since the collective performance of stories was the study’s theme, these interviews focused less on student cases than on reflection about the group itself and its institutional role, in line with the para-ethnographic principle of reflexive interviewing by the participants themselves (Holmes & Marcus, 2008). In addition, artifacts such as emails over the year, institutional presentation slides, spreadsheet data and statistical analyses were collected.

With reference to the latter, while quantitative data were collected as part of the program and statistical analyses performed, the results of these analyses here are not relevant for the substantive conclusions of the current work. As discussed below, quantitative data was regarded as key in the legitimation process of the group, and so for

my purposes, the results of these analyses in terms of student outcomes is less important than the role they played in framing group discussions. Such use of numbers in legitimating accounts is well documented (e.g. Gephart, 2006), and as I will argue, reflected a tacit understanding that the statistical data represented its object in a fundamentally different way than the storytelling events.

I began the study with the intent of remaining relatively inactive and focusing on my observer role (e.g. Berg, 2001), and communicated this intent with the group. However, as many ethnographers have noted (e.g. Jackson, 2010) remaining aloof is perhaps impossible, often misleading, and may even be more obtrusive and distracting than contributing as a normal group member. Thus, when asked my opinion, or for help in making sense of statistical data, for example, I felt obliged to contribute. This however, has been recognized as a standard ethnographic dilemma (e.g. Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and the impossible demand for purely detached observation has been replaced by the emphasis on reflexivity on one's own position. In any study where the researcher participates in the collective, the data are in part constructed by the ethnographer him/herself. Further, conducting interviews in which I incite reflection about group processes may influence the participants in future discussions. Finally, having an academic participating may have led to a tendency to focus more on formal measurement, rather than free-flowing storytelling, and to refrain from telling more "juicy" stories. Even so, in most meetings the formal process of student assessment quickly gave way to circles of storytelling, and my perception was that as I became a more integrated member of the group, I was "let in" to the more privy details.

As an analytical tool, the initial notes were selected for extracts involving the coordination or discussion of different perspectives on the new center's role, consistent with epistemic impasse. This "theoretical sampling" technique is a component of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967) based on the premise that qualitative theory must evolve during the course of research, such that a pre-existing theoretical construct cannot be imposed on the setting, but can be used to guide data selection, which then iteratively modifies the theoretical interest (e.g. Hughes & Sharrock, 2002). In this way, the general theme of counterposed epistemes became focused during the meeting on the storytelling practices, and in particular, on how stories were used to both allow sensemaking while keeping the sensemaking process open-ended.

It is important to note that storytelling at this site characterized different levels. Students told stories to the Center's professionals, and the professionals eventually had to create a coherent narrative to present to the administration. While I treat this final narrative somewhat in the results, in order to show the limits of storytelling, my ethnographic focus is what happened *between* these two levels, in the stories told among group members about the students and their own role. Since the conflicting epistemes, I argue occurred within the composition of the group, which was embryonic and in search of self-definition, I believe that this level is best suited to demonstrate the use of story in dealing with epistemic impasse.

STRUGGLING WITH IMPASSE AND THE SEARCH FOR DEFINITION

My first encounter before meeting with the committee involved an informal discussion of its objectives with one of its founding members. Later, I would hear alternate accounts of these objectives, all explicitly recognizing the presence of impasse.

During the course of the year, these alternate stories mobilized different institutional resources in interpreting and dealing with particular student situations, often explicitly struggling over these interpretations and actions.

In my initial introduction, this member (pseudonym Estelle) explained the need to dialogue with students about their psychological needs and extra-curricular lives, noting that career services a rare site in the school where students could speak to older professionals about developmental issues. However, because career services was oriented towards professional development only, it was inadequate to deal with more personal needs. As a consequence, unit members found themselves dealing with issues for which they were unable to offer help, such as depression, social anxiety, and other psychosocial issues. Indeed, the career services unit had become a kind of pseudo-therapy session in which students, often in groups, came to discuss social problems. Thus, the emergent unit dedicated specifically with such issues would both free up career services personnel and give students a more appropriate forum for the discussion of psychosocial issues. It would also give students the feeling that their personal needs were important to the school, increasing their loyalty and satisfaction.

In a parallel development, the members of the academic disciplinary unit began to discuss the importance of psychosocial issues linked with infractions of the school's ethics code. Particularly, the disciplinary committee was unable to assess claims that student behavior was driven by depression, personality, or behavioral disorders. Markedly, when questions of past trauma, suicide, or other unstable behavior were present, members felt uncomfortable treating these issues in a purely disciplinary light.

On the one hand, the school was neither equipped nor legally required to provide psychological or psychiatric services. On the other hand, to ignore such important issues seemed to signal an insensitivity on the part of the school to student needs. This created a demand for some form of service by which such issues could be addressed.

In a third development, the head of the academic disciplinary unit (pseudonym: Helga) explained that one of the main drivers behind the formation of the project was concern around the division between ethical-disciplinary and educational outcomes for students. She saw cases of disciplinary action, regarding ethical infractions or reprimands for breaching the school's ethics code, as potential learning opportunities. Because university-related ethical dilemmas could carry over into the workplace, it was thought that the disciplinary function should incorporate educational or professional development components. To quote her perspective on this mixture

“It is just a change in atmosphere, things shifted and then it was accepted. You see we often bump into things wherever we move. If we take a step in one direction, we bump into the professors, a step in the other, we bump into directors, it limited our space to act”.

To focus solely on discipline, according to Helga, would be myopic, not taking advantage of the school to increase student's professional development. Because professional development was a key strategic objective of the school, the project was given the go-ahead, with the onus of demonstrating how intervention could succeed in promoting positive student outcomes, a key feature in the subsequent development of the project. In Helga's words, *“At first I was very frustrated, I didn't know which way to go, but then Estelle told me “that's what you are here for, to blaze a trail through this”.*

Then I understood that everyone was confused, that I could discover on my own the right solution.”

Interestingly, as the department developed, its central interface with students came from a counseling psychologist, whose role was not to provide medical-type therapy or treatment, but rather a forum for discussion. The fact that a psychologist was chosen for this function is interesting, given the dual focus on professional development on the one hand, and disciplinary action on the other. However, there was a ubiquitous recognition both professional and disciplinary problems spilled over into psychological and interpersonal issues. However, throughout the development of the project, it was consistently emphasized that the school was not in the business of providing medical or psychological treatment. The medical model of intervention was strictly rejected. Because such intervention would involve bureaucratic, legal, and infrastructure issues that the school was not prepared to provide, it was avoided as a conceptual base for thinking about the project. Yet, the issues involved often came back to questions of psychological treatment, and the presence of a counselor at the center of the project (and as the ultimate institution-student interface) made total avoidance of these questions impossible.

NARRATIVIZING SPILLOVER: CELEBRATING CASE STORIES

The multifaceted nature of the Center led to diverse motivations and issues from students. Students could be referred to the Center because of difficulties with academic performance, as a result of placement on academic probation. Some students were referred because of disciplinary cases involving ethical infractions. Many students came

to the Center spontaneously, with problems of career-related or social anxiety, or depression, and often around exam-periods.

With regards to both the students' interactions with the Center, and the organizational members' own self-understandings of its mission, stories played a key role in discussions around what the Center did and was. The diverse and conflicting missions of the Center were discussed among team members through trading stories, which were often left "open" while representing key tensions surrounding these missions.

In one illustration, during a developmental meeting of the Center's administrators, the counselor related the story of a student, sent to the center because of low academic performance. The student, eager to seek academic counseling, had been reluctant to continue consulting the support staff because he was "already in therapy" with an outside psychologist. This statement put the counselor in an odd position because, after all, she was a counseling psychologist, but their interaction was not supposed to "count" as therapy, although the topics discussed seemed identical to those in a therapy session. The story forced the group to confront the fact that the relation between career counseling, academic discipline and psychotherapy had been called into question.

A story like this, in addition, showed the intractability of the epistemic impasse involved, because of the various legitimate claims being made on the counseling space. The discussion between the counselor, the career specialist, and the disciplinary administrator in the meeting turned to an acknowledgement "yes, it really does seem like we are doing many things at once." Where narrative has often been seen as seeking closure, stories here opened up a space for acknowledgment across different functional spheres.

In a second example, a student was having trouble working in groups, and felt socially alienated in the school environment. After some soul-searching, the student had “discovered that he was homosexual, and is very excited and relieved”. However, the story continued, the student felt that the school had a macho culture, and was antagonistic to homosexuals. The student was sad because he would no longer be possible to “buddy around” with his male friends, and to further his career, it would be important to “keep the information to himself (imagine putting this on your CV!)”.

As in the previous example, the group demonstrated a fair amount of ambivalence regarding this case. On the one hand, the members expressed support regarding the psychological relief of the student’s acceptance of his homosexuality. On the other hand, the “CV” comment drew wide agreement; this student would inevitably face career difficulties, and possible academic problems because of his “condition”. The group’s role of psychological support seemed to bump up against their view of the student as “human capital”, and the group was concerned about the student’s ability to “protect himself” by hiding his homosexuality. In this case, again, closure was impossible. The group ended the meeting by deciding to “check up on him” throughout the semester to make sure he his balancing his life, including checking on the progression of his academic performance.

In a third example, a story emerged about a student who “destroys himself”, engaging in multiple infractions of the school ethics code and acting aggressively toward other students. The support staff’s first statement was “let’s first *diagnose* the situation, and then create an *action plan*” (at this point, everyone in the meeting laughed, perhaps noting the medical connotation of diagnosis, and the business/strategic connotation of an action plan, in a case which was referred due to an ethical infraction). When the student

complained that his mother wanted him to go to therapy, the staff had responded, “yes, *let’s*”, but then retracted “it may be a good idea, but *you* will have to decide”. The support staff then continued the story, describing how the student had failed his midterm exams, and that the counsellor would have to “minimize” his destructiveness so that he does not fail his course. And yet, the story ended, the market is competitive, as is the world, and so the school must also be competitive.

Here, the juxtaposition of therapeutic, strategic, and disciplinary outlooks is clear and creates a tension. Tellingly, whenever the narrative begins to emphasize a moral or message, these contradictory epistemes came to light and threatened to turn the case incoherent. By sticking to the story, they are able to coexist in the figure of the student being represented. Because the student is not a theoretical argument but a concrete, lived case, such contradictions do not undermine the story but enrich it by showing its diverse features. By proliferating such case stories, the support unit was able to juggle the inconsistencies of its missions with a certain degree of fluency.

A SPACE FOR SENSE AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CHALLENGE

As described above, the storytelling practices within the Center allowed team members to cross departmental boundaries by framing their mission in terms that allowed for multiple meanings. In the early stages, these boundaries were more heavily policed, but the expanded sensemaking possibilities of stories were soon felt and became a *modus operandi* for the team. For example, early in the meetings, the counseling psychologist would refer to the student interactions as “treatment”, but often apologized and corrected herself, using instead “support”. Later, however, notions of treatment, discipline, and career success intermingled in discussions of the center’s mission.

By framing storytelling as a kind of departmental narrative, however, a unified picture of student development as storytelling became, paradoxically, a kind of monological approach. Similar to Boje's (e.g. 2001) discussion of antenarrative, stories not only oppose closed narratives, but themselves hold the seeds of future narrative closure, as narrative paths are normalized by the group. In this setting, a narrative of "total education" was able to arise as the group saw its boundaries as increasingly porous and applicable to all areas of school life.

From Spillover to Totalization

Embracing the spillover that occurred during team meetings gave the Center license to enter new territory with regards to the students. For example, in the case of a student who had weak grades and had been to counseling, the counselor was able to check up on the student before holidays, to make sure his grades had improved. This would only be possible as of a pro-social check-up, rather than as a form of disciplinary monitoring. However, such "check-ups" were given legitimacy because of their therapeutic import, just as the therapeutic component of the Center was legitimized by the prospect of improving student career outcomes. By not focusing on impasses, the Center was thus able to expand its institutional mandate.

Such expansion, as the Center evolved, led to a kind of totalization of its mission, in which any aspect of a student's university experience was fair game for the "holistic" mission of the Center. During meetings, the team discussed strategies for expanding the educational/disciplinary/therapeutic role of actors across the university, from librarians to professors to cleaning and plant staff. Because students' lived experiences spilled over institutional boundaries, staff members argued, all university staff were responsible for

providing a “total educational environment”, a concept that fused interpersonal sensitivity training with disciplinary supervision and professional support. By the third month of the Center’s meetings, active discussions took place regarding how to train diverse university members in this integrative view of student affairs.

As a corollary to the expanded purview of the Center’s mission in team discourse, the team members began to consider the role of the Center as a more general, sensemaking body within the school. Whereas earlier discussions had focused on particular student problems, the discussions began to take into account more general school-wide issues, such as exam week, graduation, and other anxiety producing events. Because such events were marked by psychological pressures (text anxiety, stress), career-related factors (academic performance and credential giving) and disciplinary factors (cheating on exams, other pressure-related behavioral problems), the Center was discussed as a way to “smooth over” such tense periods at a macro level. Because of the relatively small capacity of the Center (which could feasibly see no more than a few dozen students per week), such ambitions were, operationally speaking, quite distant, but the idea behind these ambitions confirmed the role of spillover as a totalizing potential.

Using storytelling in this way shifted its discursive function somewhat, from a way of negotiating impasse within the group, to a practical narrative aimed at creating inter-departmental bonds. The establishment of storytelling as a central aspect of the group’s identity narrative worked legitimized the group as central to the school’s mission, but also brought an imperative to measurement of outcomes that ultimately undermined the free-floating nature of the storytelling experience. If antenarrative guards the lived nature of stories, then in this sense, the demand for empirical measurement might be

considered a “post-narrative”, a specification in operational terms of the aspects that formalized narrative promises.

Afterward: From Totalization to Fragmentation via Measurement

The movement from interdisciplinary encounter to storytelling to a progressive totalization occurred during the ten-month period I spent working with and observing the Center. Toward the final two months, the storytelling environment had encountered a new organizational challenge in attempting to measure its impacts in student outcomes. While the discussions throughout had used storytelling to widen the net of relevance for the Center, this very breadth made it difficult to measure, quantify, or operationalize its results. In what could be metaphorically termed a “hydraulic” process, the more wide-reaching the activities of the department became, the more it came under pressure to define and justify its operations, which led to a circumscription of the very storytelling aspects which had allowed it to reach such breadth.

Under institutional pressure to form a metric that could be used over time to measure outcomes, the team set to operationally define its task and key variables. While the earlier meeting had focused on stories, later meetings required that such stories “mean something” in terms of a particular variable. As Helga stated during one of the later meetings, “single cases motivated us, but the school needs numbers”. In this way, the team began to argue over which variables were key to measure impacts, psychosocial, career-oriented, or disciplinary.

Throughout these discussions, I was asked to provide advice about psychometric measurement, and my attempts to suggest scales were met with repeated frustration on the part of the members. Psychometric instruments were too long to apply in the sessions,

and therapeutic outcomes were too difficult to operationalize, as compared to career-related factors (academic achievement) and disciplinary features (e.g. repeated ethical infractions). Thus, the resulting quantitative metric began to be formed based on the latter variables, effectively reducing the “psychological” mandate of the Center and emphasizing its “operational” side.

By the end of the study period, the group had clearly made a move to “clean up” the epistemic spillover that stories had accommodated, and to emphasize academic and disciplinary issues over therapeutic issues. As told to a counselor during a meeting, “you shouldn’t get involved with those problem stories. Don’t go into that territory”. Worried about overextending their mandate and running into possible legal issues regarding the relation between therapy, discipline, and academics, the group hired a legal consultant, whom we met with collectively. As the consultant listened to our stories about student interactions, she expressed perplexity with the Center, stating that the holistic view being promoted would result in confusion, lower standards, and ultimately, student dissatisfaction. After acknowledging the multifaceted nature of student experiences, she put it bluntly, “but if you believe in his story, everyone will invent a story”.

The movement outlined above is described in Figure 1. During meetings, broad and incommensurable epistemes became negotiated through storytelling, which allowed the co-articulation of each episteme without closing off the other, this strategy became concretized into a generalized meta-narrative about the groups role, which totalized its educational mission and expanded its mandate across the school. Finally, this expansion drew claims of accountability and demands for measurement of impacts, a re-closing of boundaries that undermined the openness of the initial strategy.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As an ethnographic study of a group that itself is occupied with its own reflexive constitution as a culture in transition, the current study joins an emergent literature on para-ethnography (Holmes & Marcus, 2008; Holmes & Marcus, 2006). While my own self-reflexive participation involved an autoethnographic component, the fact that this reflexivity took place in the context of a group's self-constitutive discussions and cultural self-searching gives a clear example of a para-ethnographic site. In the growing organizational literature on expert cultures (e.g. Kaplan, 2011) recent discussion of para-ethnography may be particularly relevant to organizational scholars working across increasingly fluid boundaries. In such cultures, the reflexivity of the ethnographer is matched by that of the group members, and becomes itself a locus of study. In this case, such reflexivity was manifested in open-ended stories.

Past studies of stories and narratives have generally taken two broad tracks. On the one hand, they have described narratives as varieties of institutional frames, structures of sensemaking that influence interpretations and restrict conclusions within a given narrative structure (e.g. Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 1997; Bruner, 1990). On the other hand, storytelling perspectives (e.g. Boje, 2001) have contrasted stories and "antenarratives" with formalistic narratives, with the former as methods of contestation, where counter-frames can be introduced within organizational systems (Boje, 2001). The current study, while acknowledging these two functions of narratives, claims that stories also serve as mediating mechanisms to work between and patch over differences between different epistemic frameworks.

This novel contribution to the storytelling literature joins antenarrative theory in viewing stories as initially open, while shifting focus away from stories' deconstructive aspect (Jorgesen & Boje, 2010). The openness of stories can serve to "loosen" epistemic conventions that are embodied through narrative forms, thus subverting dominant institutions, but can also provide a mediating space between institutional forms, through which co-existence of different epistemes is possible.

In the current case, coexisting therapeutic, disciplinary, and professional frameworks made it difficult to formulate a coherent and unified perspective regarding student behavior. Rather than explaining different behaviors, the same student cases (e.g. unruly behavior during class) could be equally and validly described as an outcome of psychosocial difficulties, a disciplinary-ethical issue, or a professional shortcoming. Further, each framing would seem dissonant with the others (epistemic impasse), but also complement and enrich a more "full" understanding of the case (epistemic spillover). Moving from a "diagnostic" to a "storytelling" mode in the meeting allowed this layering aspect of epistemic spillover to create a rich discussion of the students, including emotive, visually descriptive, and aesthetic aspects of student interactions, exactly by bracketing and putting aside the question of which epistemic framework was diagnostically correct. The resulting discourse was less discipline-specific, and more able to reflect diverse visions of students.

The result, as described above, was two-fold. First, a storytelling style developed among members that allowed each member to add student case stories, overlaying views of students simultaneously as professional jobseekers, disciplinary subjects and victims. Second, this inclusiveness allowed the totalization of the small unit's mandate within the

organization. University librarians, IT assistants, and cafeteria workers could contribute via their unique student interface to the story of student behavior, and the group routinely discussed how to include such diverse constituencies in their purview.

Although these two observations could be independent, it is not difficult to see how an amplification of framing possibilities through the incompleteness of storytelling versus diagnosing strategies could lead to a subsequent universalization of the unit's mandate. In effect, the group, through stories' non-requirement of completeness, had discovered a mechanism of sensemaking that sacrificed singular vision and critical evaluation for phenomenological richness. By avoiding closure and admitting such layering, the group was able to carry out sensemaking unimpeded by the epistemic impasses that diagnostic or critical evaluation would have generated.

The notion of "sense" implied in such sensemaking, however, is distinct from conceptions of "sense" emphasizing conceptual closure. It is worth noting that Weick's (e.g. 1995) concept of sensemaking, far from cognitive closure, emphasized the fluid and ongoing nature of sensemaking processes. Sensemaking is an "ongoing retrospective development" (Weick et al, 2005, p 409), rather than a concretized institutional form, although it does emphasize the search for cognitive closure. This emphasis on closure may make it easy for sensemaking perspectives to slip into a focus on order and coherence, while Weick's concept always juxtaposed the search for closure with the ongoing processual nature of sensemaking attempts. Thus, the current emphasis on story reinforces the incompleteness of sensemaking processes that were key to the original concept.

The current study thus moves sensemaking away from literal, representational notions of sense shift to storied or allegorical conceptions. Because literal propositions about the world derive coherence from particular epistemes, epistemic impasse makes the coexistence of different worldviews problematic. In literal conceptions, the epistemic spillover of events and characters from their literal descriptions must be contained or suppressed. Alternatively, storied approaches allow for coexistence because impasse itself becomes an element of story. Rather than containment, the richness of events is represented through stories precisely through the contradictory angles from which they may be approached. In other words, while hypotheses or diagnoses may be judged by clarity, the best stories are precisely those that embody multiple possibilities for interpretation.

It may be asked whether such as multiplicity can be captured by the notion of episteme, which is world-defining and epochal in scope (O'Leary & Chia, 2007). This is precisely the point, however; according to Foucault (1970) the disciplinary, therapeutic, and self-development modalities are not simply points of view on a topic, but are alternative definitions of the human, materialized in institutions and practices that suggest different ways of organizing society as such. Although Foucault (1972) later suggests that epistemes can co-exist, organizational theory's role would be to explore the implications and possibilities of the co-existence of such fundamentally different orientations in attempts to organize people and institutional spaces. This study leaves open whether such co-existence is possible across levels of an organization; in the current setting, this possibility remains limited to a relatively limited storytelling space. However, the existence of such a space creates a "wedge" for epistemic openness that holds open

the potential for overcoming epistemic impasse. The question to explore then becomes whether impasse can be overcome over more wide-reaching institutional settings.

A second key criticism is the following: Do we not know that stories are vehicles of culture and ideology (e.g. Vaara & Tienari 2011), carrying messages about how the world is and should be? To the extent that this is the case, stories fit into institutional frameworks right along with disciplinary, theoretical, and other institutional boundaries. By saying that stories can stand aloof from their material and theoretical moorings, might we remain blind to the ideological biases inherent in stories?

I do believe we should recognize the partiality of stories, yet equally assert that stories are not *limited* to their ideological messages. Rather, the difference between stories and theories is that theory explicitly states, and limits itself to, a given stand-point, while stories always, in an important sense, leave some part of themselves unexplained and unexplainable (e.g. Clifford, 1986). This is why stories that attempt to moralize often seem to fail *as stories*. That is, if a story were reducible to its moral or message, the best stories would be the most explicit. But stories that are overly focused on their message cease to be convincing. Why is this the case?

As discussed above, this effect has to do with the fact that while both theoretical and institutional principles (as well as closed formal narrative conventions) establish general rules or structures, abstracted from particular cases (e.g. Dimaggio, 1995), stories demonstrate the general through and by means of particular cases (e.g. Clifford, 2003; Van Maanen, 1995). While a general rule might approximate the lived experience of particular actors, it leaves gaps because of its attempt to move beyond the particularity of experience. Stories have the ability to recapture and represent individual cases, but do so

at the cost of directly articulable general relations (Arendt, 1968c). Similar to antenarratives (Boje, 2001), such stories contain the potential for narrative formalization but also contest such formalization. Thus, although stories may suggest theoretical principles, they leave open spaces in which different interpretive and narrative avenues can be explored. These avenues can either supplement or divert dominant institutions. In the current case, this openness of stories was used to transition between the distinct institutional spaces of psychotherapy, career management, and disciplinary control that found themselves at an impasse in the site studied. The plasticity of stories allowed these forms to coexist in a way that a more explicit institutional framing would not have permitted.

Yet, this plasticity posed a threat to each institutional framing, making itself felt in the periodic attempts to foreclose on storytelling and “get to business”. Ultimately, the need to document and measure the unit’s performance created a focus on defining concrete objectives. The possible antagonistic relation between metrics and sensemaking processes is underexplored in the sensemaking literature, and involves the competition between closed (operationally defined) and open (storytelling) sensemaking devices.

In conclusion, the current study describes a case in which epistemic spillover led to the search for creative ways to preserve the open-ended nature of student experiences. Storytelling allowed different departmental actors to come together in the medium of narrative, each finding their own epistemic focus available through this medium. Where the cross-functionality of teams is an increasingly present aspect of contemporary organization, perhaps this case study can serve as a template for sensemaking in diverse organizational contexts.

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Figure 1. *Trajectory of Group Sensemaking Process*

