

From Loss to Lack: Stories of Organizational Change as Encounters with Failed Fantasies of Self, Work and Organization

(Submission for Special Issue on Storytelling and Change in Organizations)

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Abstract

This study advances research on storytelling and organizational change by exploring 40 stories of change from a psychoanalytic, particularly Lacanian, perspective. It suggests that stories of organizational change serve an important and to date under-explored role as creative and empowering encounters with failed fantasies of self, work and organization. Implications for research on storytelling and organizational change are discussed.

Keywords: storytelling, organizational change, psychoanalysis, Lacan, lack

Introduction

Storytelling has become a widely used theoretical lens and method for studying organizations (Boje, 1991; 1995; 2001; Gabriel, 1991; 1995; 1997; 1998; 2000). Most recently, stories, encompassing fully developed as well as fragmentary narratives, have been used to study organizational change (Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Brown, Humphreys and Gurney, 2005; Currie and Brown, 2003). Specifically, as part of a wider effort to understand organizational changing as a process of becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) via the study of change as discourse (Anderson, 2005; Beech and Johnson, 2005; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Humphreys and Brown, 2002), stories have emerged as an important tool for studying the messiness of change (O'Connor, 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this line of inquiry by examining what stories of change can tell us about how people experience change and what conscious as well as unconscious meanings they may attach to it. In particular, I explore a sense of loss as a central theme in stories of organizational change and how the loss expressed by storytellers can also be understood as a constructive and empowering struggle with fundamental lack. Building on prior research in which organizational change has been found to involve unconscious desires and fantasies, such as defenses against change (Carr, 2000; Diamond, 1986; Kets De Vries and Balazs, 1998), as well as research showing stories to be an effective means for investigating the unconscious desires and fantasies of storytellers (Gabriel, 1995; 1997; 1998; 2000), I examine stories of change as encounters with failed fantasies about work, self and organization.

Specifically, I draw on Lacanian psychoanalytic theorizing (e.g. Lacan, 1988a;b) to advance the idea that it is not organizational change that makes organizations, work

and self lacking but that it may be change that brings to the surface the lack that is always there. I suggest that in bringing this lack to the surface, stories of organizational change serve an important and to date under-explored role. Particularly, they serve to empower storytellers not just by allowing them to contest dominant discourses of organizational change (Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Brown et al., 2005; Currie and Brown, 2003; Mills, Boylstein and Lorean, 2001) but, importantly, to appropriate these discourses as resources for a very personal and powerful encounter with how fantasies of self, work and organization can never contain who we are and what we want. As such, the study contributes a new perspective on stories of organizational change as a practice of creative performativity (Butler, 1993) providing opportunities for storytellers to assert that they are powerful and creative subjects (Lacan, 1988b) and thereby to widen the space of human subjectivity in organizations (Gabriel, 1995) as a space in which the nothingness of organizations, work and self can be acknowledged (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007: 363).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I review key Lacanian ideas to further explain the notion of lack. Second, I outline the study's methodology. I then explore various meanings of the stories with regard to the central theme of loss, which I examine in the next section relative to storytellers' struggles with failed fantasies and fundamental lack. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of this perspective for research on storytelling and organizational change.

Lacan and Lack

By way of providing further analysis of the concept of lack, I now provide a brief overview of psychoanalytic concepts relative to how subjects construct themselves in stories and other discourse not just consciously but in relation to unconscious fantasies of

the self. The emphasis here is on Lacanian theorizing, a particular and not widely used brand of psychoanalysis, building on but also extending Freudian perspectives especially with a view toward the importance of language (Lacan, 2001).

Recently, Lacanian theorizing has been drawn on in organization studies to explore a number of organizational issues such as leadership, creativity, coaching, power, stress, identity and spirituality (Arnaud, 2002; 2003a; Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007; Jones and Spicer, 2005; Driver, 2005; 2008; 2009; Roberts, 2005; Vanheule, Lievrout and Verhaeghe, 2003). In my review of concepts, I will draw on this research as well as Lacan's major theoretical works (Lacan, 1977a;b; 1988a;b; 1991; 2001). Further introductions are also available elsewhere (e.g. Arnaud, 2002; 2003a;b; Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007; Driver 2008; 2009).

A central idea of Lacanian theorizing is that the normal discourse in and through which we consciously construct the self is an imaginary construction in which the person is stuck on an illusion or fantasy. In this fantasy the self has a stable and definitive identity and knows and can obtain what it desires. This fantasy is constructed first as a way to overcome the experience of helplessness, disintegration and lack that stands in sharp contrast to the feeling of being whole and fulfilled in the womb. Later this fantasy persists and the imaginary, while being an illusory object of the ego, is what we cling to in order to define who we are and what we want.

We do this because we have to use language and discourse to construct identity and desire which forces us to adopt structures and ways of expression determined by social conventions. Lacan referred to this as the symbolic order. In this order, all we can do is express who we are and what we want in the words of others and none of what we

say seems to be authentic or real as the real is never in the symbolic. Who we are and what we want seem to be permanently missing, elusive and lacking. It seems to be impossible to do what we really want to do, namely to return to our original experience of the world before we felt lacking. Indeed all that remains of who we really are is our being lost in the symbolic order while clinging to fantasies that continuously fail to deliver what we are looking for.

Lacanian psychoanalysis does not offer a cure for this but does suggest that we can take a different position toward lack. In particular, a Lacanian perspective asks us to appreciate that each of us is marked uniquely by this lack (Ragland, 1996) and it is in how we reiterate, circle and experience this lack that we can come closest to feeling primal, fulfilled and whole as subjects. We do this in the only way we can, namely in and through discourse and speech. Specifically, we do this by paying attention to and reflecting on how our speech is disrupted and how we struggle with words and fail to say what we want to say.

In noticing the many failure points that mark our conscious speech we can momentarily render transparent particular instances of what is missing, lost, absent and lacking. And it is in those moments that we most powerfully disrupt the imaginary and encounter not only the failure of our fantasies but importantly the self as an illusion of the ego that cannot contain, capture and hold who we are as subjects. In doing so we do not gain conscious or real knowledge of who we are and what we want, which remains impossible, but we do gain at least a momentary liberation from what we are normally stuck in and, therefore, the experience of the self as a powerful and creative subject.

Methodology

The stories explored here were collected during a class project for a graduate course I teach on Managing Change. Students were asked to interview one individual willing to share a story of an organizational change that had personally affected the storyteller. Students were asked to focus on collecting stories from persons who were affected by changes initiated by others rather than on individuals who were initiating change themselves. The purpose of the assignment was to better understand what it feels like to undergo changes and examine the emotional and personal meanings attached to organizational change based on first-hand accounts that could be discussed among students in the course.

Storytellers were told that their stories would be discussed in public and potentially used for research and were offered anonymity. Students were not prompted to collect any particular type of story and were provided with only basic insights into storytelling as a research method (Gabriel, 2000). Specifically, I suggested that the students should focus on meaning rather than facts (Gabriel, 1991; 2000) and engage with the storytellers' emotions as a "fellow traveler" (Gabriel, 1998: 137) letting the storytellers tell their stories as undisturbed as possible prompting them only occasionally to inquire about the meaning of events. The students tape-recorded the telling of the story and provided a transcript of the storyteller's words.

40 stories were collected in total, 17 stories during the fall semester 2005 and 23 stories during the fall of 2006. All stories collected by students taking the courses are included in this study. Each story contains an average of 129 lines for a total of 5172 lines of text. All stories are referred to by story number from 1 to 40 and line number

from the transcript. So (1/20-21) would refer to story 1, lines 20-21. Any identifying information has been removed including names of organizations and storytellers who were given pseudonyms. 22 storytellers are male, 18 female. 17 storytellers hold lower to mid-level managerial positions while the other 23 hold non-managerial or front-line positions. The stories cover a range of occupations from accountants to nurses, schoolteachers, cooks, sales clerks, call-center agents, to bank, retail and office managers, engineers, translators, speech therapists and CPR instructors. They also cover a wide range of industries including manufacturing, healthcare, food, financial services, chemical, automotive, janitorial services, textile, energy, retail, high-tech, NGO, not-for-profit and education.

The stories were examined based on a number of perspectives pursuing different theoretical lenses, themes and categorizations (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000; Gabriel, 1998; 2000). With an effort at employing a reflexive methodology and remaining as open to the data as possible (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000), I tried to approach the stories as contested and perhaps contestable narratives co-constructed by a number of voices including the storytellers, the students who interviewed and transcribed the stories as well as my and others' subsequent interpretations that continue to perform the stories over time (Boje et al., 1999). As I sought to interpret the stories in an iterative process looking for themes that seemed evident and then returning to the data to explore how each theme was narrated in specific instances, I tried to remain mindful that I was also setting the stage for the performance of this paper (Boje, 2001) and not just researching the complexities of change but also looking to craft what I believe to be a "good story" (Kornberger and Brown, 2007: 501).

As I initially read the stories to get a sense of their overall character, central story lines and themes (Gabriel, 2000), what struck me about them was their overall negative character. As one of the reviewers for this paper pointed out, the stories seemed to be “all bleak”. By way of remaining as reflexive as possible (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) this prompted me to examine the reasons for this, such as whether the storytellers thought that bleak stories would make for better stories or had received subtle clues by their interviewers (Gabriel, 2000), whether the stories capture that organizational change is often accompanied by pain and injury (Stein, 2001) or whether bleakness is part of the performance of this paper privileging marginalized accounts of change (Gabriel, 1995) and my own fantasies (Gabriel, 1995; 1997) that, as one reviewer put it, “change is a bad thing done by irresponsible managers and workers suffer”.

After some consideration I decided to treat this impression as a first-level interpretation (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) which I would continue to question and explore. To obtain a different perspective I engaged in second-level interpretations (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) using a classification scheme developed elsewhere in which stories are grouped by types relative to key emotions and story lines (Gabriel, 1998; 2000). This provided a more fine-grained approach and allowed me to see that the stories were not as bleak as they first appeared and that negative experiences were not only presented as positive accomplishments but that the central theme of the stories, namely a sense of loss, could also be explored as a constructive and empowering encounter with lack.

To group each story by type I used key words referring to storytellers’ emotions and the central story line in an iterative process that resulted in four story types, namely

gripes, traumas, tragedies and epics (Gabriel, 1998; 2000). Gripes express anger over ill-treatment while traumas and tragedies focus on more severe psychic injuries with tragedies also expressing feelings of horror at what has been done (Gabriel, 1998; 2000). Epics, in turn, focus on storytellers' achievements in the face of trials or problems (Gabriel, 1998; 2000). I classified 18 stories as gripes, 10 as traumas, 1 as tragedy and 11 as epics.

Stories of Loss

In this section, I explore and illustrate each story type with excerpts from the narratives. My focus across the sections is to examine the conscious meaning storytellers seem to attach to organizational change and to develop the central theme of loss as a point of departure for the next section where I explore less conscious meanings and the theme of loss in relation to lack.

Gripes. I begin my illustration of each story type with gripes. For this type I selected stories in which storytellers criticized their organizations for injustices or injuries they experienced as a result of organizational change. For example, Amy, a loan officer at a bank, shared a story about a recent restructuring during which many employees performing “backroom” functions and all files were to be transferred to a centralized operations center:

When those people left to the operations center, things just got worse...they expected us to make copies of every file that we kept in the office. Literally thousands...It was absolutely ridiculous. ...So I would work even later and come in early in the morning just to get the stupid copying done...It was horrible. If I didn't work on the files during the day because I was taking care of my

customers, I would feel guilty...So then, of course, I was tired and stressed out all the time...They [management] just wanted it done and didn't care how it got done. I don't think I ever saw any of them working on the files with us...It was awful. There was basically no communication at all, except to tell us something else we had to do. I think the whole thing was poorly planned from the beginning...And they really weren't open to feedback or anything. They probably just didn't want to listen to us complain, but it was really ridiculous. I would occasionally ask a question or suggest a different approach, but I was always just brushed away (14/19-59).

In this excerpt, the storyteller expresses anger and hurt at how she felt she was being treated by her supervisors whom she only refers to as "they". The focus of her feeling horrible and awful seemed to be not so much the operational change itself but rather that during and after the change "they" did something that they did not seem to have done before, namely not listening or caring and brushing her away.

This is echoed in Monty's story, an engineer in the high tech industry whose company was restructured following a buy-out. Monty is angry over how he and his coworkers were treated and describes the restructuring as "really a sucky time" (26/72) after which his attitude to work and organization changed drastically to "like srew you" (26/71). In Monty's story, like Amy's, what seemed to be the focus of the storyteller's pain centered around something that was missing after the change that had been there before. In Amy's case it seemed to be care and in Monty's case it seemed to be relationships and happiness:

This [the time prior to restructuring] was one of the best, I mean, was one of the happiest times. I had good relationships with them and they mentored me, teaching me just about everything I know today (26/6-8).

Several of the other stories I classified as gripes seemed to echo frustration in relation to a loss. One storyteller complains that she no longer has the input she used to have prior to the implementation of new performance standards (19). Another complains that he feels no longer valued after his bank was bought out by another (30) and yet another is angry and sad because after a consolidation his organization stopped having a face in the community and caring about people (24). What seemed noteworthy to me in these and other stories was that the gripe was related closely not just to new organizational realities but also to a lost or missing past as if the storytellers had been, as Monty said, “happiest” (26/6) prior to the change and afterwards this happiness vanished.

Traumas. This act of vanishing or a focus on loss as a result of organizational change seemed to be reiterated in the stories I classified as traumas in which the storytellers describe more severe psychic injuries than what is portrayed in a gripe often expressing outrage and/or despair (Gabriel, 1998: 147). For example, Bob, a manager for a chemical manufacturer who was just bought out by another company, describes how he felt after the company made significant changes to employee benefits:

When I started with the company in February 1977 I was told that this would be a career, that I would have a career as long as I stayed with the company. Well 29 years, 11 months and 5 days later I am being told that this dream of a career is now just a job. Because they have taken my healthcare and retirement away, that is why it is very negative. It’s something you...expected to get, uh, and now...you

are not going to get that comfort level ok that, uh, I will be taken care of the rest of my life for my 30-35 years worth of service whatever that might be when I eventually retire. That, uh, it's, it's, uh, it's tough on you, ok (29/14-33).

While the storyteller uses apparently understated words such as “negative” and “tough”, there seems to be deep disappointment and sadness in his story. The disillusionment over the dream of a career that turned out to be just a job and the lack of being taken care of by the organization seem to undermine everything that Bob thought meaningful about his work. The trauma in this sense centers on a loss of meaning, the loss of a dream and again the loss, as in Amy’s story, of the feeling of comfort and care by the organization.

A similar sense of loss seemed to be expressed in the other traumatic stories. One storyteller recounts times of despair, outrage and disgust during a restructuring where several of his coworkers lose their jobs and, even though he keeps his job, he remains bitterly disappointed in the company and sad about losing the feeling that this was good work for a good employer (37). Another recounts how she felt strained to the breaking point after a new system was implemented and how she had a sense of having lost good relations with coworkers and being listened to and cared for by her organization (27). Finally, Monica, a nursing home employee, recounts the trauma of an organization-wide restructuring during which she felt she was stuck in a new job and forgotten (7). She recounts how she feels she has lost trust and feels betrayed by her organization. Here, like in the other accounts of traumas, the storyteller’s feelings of devastation as well as outrage seem to center around something that was irrevocably lost. In Monica’s case it

seems as if her self was lost due to the change when she describes how she felt forgotten and not cared for.

Tragedy. An even more profound loss seems to be expressed in the next story, which I classified as tragic because it is more severe than trauma and accompanied by a certain amount of horror at the villainy of the organization (Gabriel, 1998). Chris, a manager at a high tech company that was bought out describes his experience:

I had lost my retirement, all my life insurance because of the sale. Nationwide we had in the first couple of weeks a lot of guys that were about to retire and they got nothing...they were devastated...there were 6 employees that committed suicide, because they were ready to retire...and this came up and they had nothing – no money and they went home and shot themselves. It was awful. I was devastated...I had counted on this retirement money that wasn't going to come through now...and so it was very devastating...you know...when you're 60 years old what are you going to do? There is no place else to go so I had to go on (31/74-85).

Here we get a sense of the devastation and hopelessness experienced by the storyteller at losing what he had counted on. He makes references to death and suicide and when he says that there was nowhere for him to go, there is a feeling of existential fear or of a loss so profound that the storyteller could barely survive.

Similar to the other stories, the injury described by the storyteller is of course also in relation to the actual change, in this case the loss of financial security, but importantly, it seems to be related to a sense of loss that is even more profound. For Chris, as in the

other stories, this loss seems to be related to losing a past sense of contentment or happiness. Chris describes the days prior to the change:

Oh, I thought it was the chance of a lifetime to be able to work for [name of company]. It was the most wonderful thing on earth to work there...nobody ever left...they took care of their employees...they were great (31/16-20).

Here we see that the storyteller seems to have suffered the profound loss of “the most wonderful thing on earth” and the care of a great organization. If indeed this work was for Chris “the chance of a lifetime” then the devastation and despair we sense in his story takes on different meaning as a loss of fulfillment and a life hoped for.

Epics. A similar sense of loss plays a central role in the stories I classified as epic focusing on having achieved something often against the odds (Gabriel, 1998). For several of the storytellers this achievement seems to be that they have developed a different perspective on what they might have lost during the change with some considering what they have undergone as a positive gain. This is illustrated in the story of Bill, an employee assistance program coordinator in a hospital, who describes how the administration in a cost-cutting effort eliminated his job:

So right then and there...we knew...that we were going to be out of jobs...People can't believe it's happening to them, they they've been employed and that the company should take care of them, we've been loyal and all this kind of stuff...it wasn't fair, it wasn't right, we were doing a good thing for people, and...uh...we were angry...It sort of got to the point where all of us just said, if it's inevitable it's not going to do us any good to sit here and moan and groan, complain and blame other people...So...we all started to help each other look for other jobs and

some of the people did get jobs right away...I think what helped us most of all, we all sort of formed a...little support group...So in terms of going through change... you have to realize that...the old normal will never be again, but you can do things to make the new normal a little bit easier...And so I learned a valuable lesson that you can never take your employment for granted, but you've always got to think about your employability (20/40-232).

Here the storyteller constructs organizational change as an epic journey in which he survived a downsizing by pulling himself out of what he refers to the loss of the “old normal” and the “illusion that I would do that [employee assistance] until I retired” (20/225). Bill describes how the change helped him learn what he refers to as a valuable lesson and prepared him to take on his own business, which made him “much happier” (20/191). What we see in this story then is still a sense of loss but we also see that the storyteller may have come to appreciate that this loss occurred. For Bill, this appreciation has to do with him feeling that he was happier in his new situation than he may have been before.

While not all epic stories referred to the storyteller's happiness or a happy ending specifically, several of the epic stories described the storyteller's achievement as having learned something important and having obtained a different perspective as a result of the change. One storyteller describes how he learned not to resent the company for having radically reduced the workforce as he now realizes this as a necessity and now considers this experience valuable (9). Another storyteller describes how he learned through the restructuring of the banking industry that you “have to be prepared to take care of

yourself” (38/201) and another explains how he now feels that the downsizing in his company although it was difficult and painful had an overall positive impact and that he learned that “as employees, we must realize this and be ready for any changes that may come along” (34/68-69).

While the interpretation that these epic stories present positive achievements as lessons learned about the need for change and perhaps acts of not viewing change as a personal offense but a general necessity can certainly be contested from a critical perspective (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) in which we may see storytellers simply subjugating themselves to management’s grammar of imperatives (Oswick, Grant, Michelson and Wailes, 2005: 384), what seemed important to me was that the positive achievement had to do with somehow working through or ridding oneself of illusions. That is, it seemed noteworthy that the epic stories were not only describing a sense of loss but that there were positive connotations to having experienced the loss and somehow having become different or even happier as a result.

What struck me was how the storytellers engaged with loss not just as lost bliss but as the loss of an illusion or an idealized state that may have actually prevented the storytellers from being happy, ready for change or able to take care of the self. It is this connection between the sense of loss expressed in the stories and the idea of illusion that I would like to explore more closely below.

Stories of Lack

I now explore how the sense of loss expressed across the story types is related not just to the actual events or the things that may have been lost during an organizational change but rather how loss is related to an illusion or a fantasy about what was before the

change or how the organization should or could be if it were not for the change. In particular, I examine how the stories serve a dual function in allowing storytellers to construct the organization, work and self in imaginary ways but also, importantly, to encounter the failure of such constructions.

This dual function seems to be particularly evident in Harry's story. Harry, a staff member at a medical hospital, describes how he felt betrayed after losing the job he loved through a reassignment:

The hardest thing to understand about the whole situation is how an organization...can transfer one so easily without any explanation as to why. I had worked hard to get to that position and had worked even harder to be successful at it and had had it taken away from me so easily...When you invest that much of your life into something, you want it to be a good experience...a successful organization should invest in their employees and reward them for good work. Organizations benefit from good employees as much as employees benefit from good organizations (10/44-65).

We can see here how Harry constructs the organization, work and self in an imaginary fashion. He constructs himself as a person who knows himself to be hardworking and successful and who had previously obtained what he wanted, namely work he could invest his life in and be rewarded for doing so by what he refers to as a "good organization". This imaginary construction fails around the inexplicable "betrayal" of the "good employee" from whom a job he "had worked hard [at]" should not be "taken away...so easily". The change, in this instance the job transfer, represents the lack of

goodness in the organization and the lack of the self as a “good employee” who invests his life in return for a “good experience”. The point here is not whether Harry or his organization are really good or not, rather that Harry’s story constructs goodness and the lack of goodness in ways that are meaningful and unique to Harry. In short, it is Harry’s fantasy and his unique experience of its construction and failure points around, for example, hard work, success and goodness, that I am underlining here.

This point can be further illustrated in Tim’s story. Tim is a CPR instructor for a healthcare firm who was asked by his supervisor to fill in as office manager. He had no prior training but seemed to be successful at his new job except for some scheduling activities requiring him to interact with other staff over the telephone. After complaints that Tim is rude, his supervisor transfers him back to being a CPR instructor:

When she [supervisor] reassigned me...she pretty much let me go...um...she took out forty hours a week that I had been depending on for almost a year and...I was punished in a way that I thought was kind of strange...that I had to attend these anger classes on dealing with difficult people after I was let go from doing the job where I would actually have to do that. I had never had a complaint about my teaching...but they deal with, uh, you know, someone like me by just getting rid of him completely even though I had made myself such an important part of the [name of project] work...For the department as a whole I think it was a really poor choice because I was a good worker...I can still do projects for her [his supervisor] but I am not her favorite anymore...which it is very cold out there...she really needs someone to be her co-manager because she has ways of doing things that are so contradictory and she doesn’t even realize it...So it is

difficult to deal with the way she handles things because she doesn't have the help that I could've afforded her...because of other poor management skills relegating me to only being an instructor...I could've helped but it is difficult because I am not allowed to do a lot of things because I might be rude to someone on the phone...it is a very difficult situation (25/63-146).

As in the previous story, what we see here is a particular fantasy of work, self and organization articulated by Tim around being a "good worker" who is an important part of his department and, importantly, a "co-manager" for his supervisor. But what we also see is the encounter with the failure of this fantasy around an organizational change in which he is "let go", "punished", "gotten rid of", "not a favorite anymore" and "relegated" to the "cold".

Importantly, what we see therefore is how the imaginary fails in particular moments of speech filled with ambiguity, tension and contradiction. For Tim the organization is both a place where he can be a good worker but also a place where he is or might be rude. His supervisor is someone who needs him but also relegates him. He is important but also gotten rid of. He is helpful but not allowed to do things. His supervisor needs him but he is not her favorite anymore. In these contradictory moments of Tim's story we can see not only the experience of the failure of the imaginary but importantly an encounter with a profound lack that is uniquely and creatively articulated by the storyteller.

We can illustrate this further in the story of Bonnie, a children's program coordinator in a not-for-profit organization, who quits her job after a new administration changes her job in a restructuring:

I worked there for three more years, but it went from something that I took seriously and something that I loved to something where I just showed up every day and brought movies and candy. It was really easy for the pay; I just got to sit there and watch movies all day. It really turned into a joke. Um, I guess I just really didn't like the attitude of the people...I felt they were kind of taking a lazy approach to the job. Um, I know the job is supposed to be about numbers, but I felt like they were pushing it too much...It just sucked because...it seemed like they weren't in it for the education or the fun for the kids, it was just something to make the company happy (36/30-55).

As Bonnie recounts how her job has become “a joke”, she articulates creatively not only her own unique fantasies of work, as something serious and loved, of organization as an entity that cares and does not have “lazy attitudes” and her self, as someone who does more than “show up everyday” and is in it for the kids, but also the particular instances in which such fantasies are disrupted.

Put differently, the story is also an expression of how Bonnie as a subject is not and does not desire to be any of those imaginary constructions. For Bonnie, as for the other storytellers, fantasies can never overcome fundamental lack, but each subject will experience and articulate this in different ways. For Bonnie the organization can never care enough, work can never be more than a joke and we can never do more than just show up. Harry can never work hard enough and his employer can never be good enough. Tim can never be helpful enough, his supervisor can never treat him favorably enough and his organization can never be warm enough, etc. In the end, or in the real, there is

only lack and the ever-present horror of the nothingness of work, organization and self (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007). However, it is precisely the articulation of what is lacking for each storyteller that also brings to the surface what is always missing in unique and empowering ways. Each storyteller has the opportunity to assert him or herself as subject and to notice the power and creativity of their own struggles with identity and desire.

This is not to belittle the very real issues and difficulties the storytellers describe. However, a Lacanian perspective drives home that there is always a fantastic quality about our experience and loss or lack are at the heart of it no matter what others actually do. Indeed, from a Lacanian perspective there is no “actual” beyond the fundamental lack that marks our existence and which we articulate. Moreover, what makes our desires and us as subjects so powerful is that we always find creative ways for all experiences, good or bad, self- or other-imposed, to connect back to and become sucked by our own fundamental lack.

Consciously, the stories may be about the power of others (organizations, managers, coworkers, work in general...) and about how, through the act of imposing or bringing about change, storytellers have many different, more or less positive, experiences. And yet, as we have seen, at another level, they are about storytellers losing something and, if we view it from a psychoanalytic perspective, about the storytellers encountering not a temporary loss but a permanent lack. The loss, no matter how annoying, traumatic, tragic or epic, is always sucked into the subject’s lack. It is in this sense that I think stories of organizational change are opportunities for empowerment and liberation. In some way, no matter how joyful or devastating our conscious experiences

of work and organizations are, they always serve us, unconsciously, to assert that we are subjects rather than mere objects of our illusions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to contribute to research on storytelling and organizational change by suggesting that stories of change serve an important and to-date under-explored role as creative and empowering encounters with the fundamental lack that marks organizations, work and self. In advancing this idea, the paper makes three contributions. First, it highlights that stories are not just inroads for understanding unconscious fantasies and desires (Gabriel, 1995; 1997) but rather that stories, particularly stories of change, are lived experiences in and through which storytellers construct but also disrupt fantasies of work, self and organization.

As such, and this is the study's second contribution, stories of change do not just reflect abstract and perhaps hegemonic discourses of organizational change variously imposed on or rejected by individual narrators (Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Brown et al., 2005; Currie and Brown, 2003; Mills, Boylstein and Loreau, 2001). Rather they also reflect each storyteller's unique experience of how lack in work, self and organization is lived with at a particular moment in time. This highlights the third contribution the study makes, namely that stories of change do not just perform, impose and contest power in organizations (Boje, et al., 1999; Brown et al., 2005). Rather stories of change are always already acts of empowerment and creative performativity (Butler, 1993) as storytellers appropriate the larger discourses of change as opportunities to experience themselves as powerful and creative subjects (Lacan, 1988b).

Future research may explore these insights further by supplementing research on storytelling (Boje, 1991; 1995; 2001; Gabriel, 1991; 1995; 1997; 1998; 2000) and organizational change as discourse (Anderson, 2005; Beech and Johnson, 2005; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Humphreys and Brown, 2002) with Lacanian approaches to language and the particular methods by which analysts pay attention to, amplify, render transparent and hold up for reflection the failures of the imaginary in the analysand's (person being analyzed) speech (Lacan, 1988a). Such methods, like a focus on ambiguities, tangents, omissions, silences, unusual constructions and other failures of speech, might provide further insight into how stories of change are experienced as the lived experience of failed fantasies and how each story articulates lack in ways that are unique to the storyteller. To do so it may be fruitful to combine an understanding of organizational change as multiple, shifting and variously fore- and back-grounded conversations in organizations (Ford, Ford and McNamara, 2002) with recent research examining the becomingness of selves and organizations (Harding, 2007).

Specifically, it may be useful to examine how stories of organizational change may be reflected on individually and/or collectively in a similar fashion to what Nancy Harding recently described with regard to how identity and desire were narrated in imaginary ways during an interview with a manager (Harding, 2007). It could then be examined how stimulating reflection of this kind may introduce alternative conversations of and about organizational change in organizations (Ford, Ford and McNamara, 2002) that supplement our understanding of organizational change as contested and contestable discourses (Brown et al., 2005) with an understanding of organizational change as a discursive resource for struggles with identity and desire. Put differently, future research

could explore how stories of organizational change allow us to render transparent that organizational change does not just involve struggles with each other but also, importantly, struggles with ourselves in terms of who we are and what we want as subjects.

This in turn opens up new conversations in organizations as well as many new avenues for exploring stories of organizational change not just as means for understanding the conscious and unconscious aspects of the messiness of organizational changing (O'Connor, 2000; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), but rather as lived practices of creative performativity (Butler, 1993) that widen the spaces of human subjectivity in organizations (Gabriel, 1995) by extending the habitat in which divided subjects can roam (Arnaud and Vanheule, 2007). That is, stories of change may widen the spaces in which we can acknowledge the horror of the nothingness of work, self and organization and at the same time feel more empowered and liberated as we recognize that it is this nothingness and the sense of lack we articulate in stories of change that make us creative and powerful as we continue to look for answers that we, thankfully, never find.

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