

**RE-STORYING NARRATIVE TEMPORALITY:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCHER**

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## **RE-STORYING NARRATIVE TEMPORALITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCHER**

### **ABSTRACT**

Our aim is to stimulate critical reflection on an issue that has received relatively little attention: how alternative presuppositions about time can lead to different narrative ways of researching and theorizing organizational life. Based on two amendments to Paul Ricoeur's work in *Time and Narrative*, we re-story narrative research in organizations as Narrative Temporality (NT). Our amendments draw upon the temporality perspective of Jean-Paul Sartre in order to re-frame narrative research in organizations as a fluid, dynamic, yet rigorous process open to the interpretations (negotiated) of its many participants (polyphonic) and situated in the context and point of enactment (synchronic). We believe an approach to narrative organizational research grounded in NT can open up new ways of thinking about experience and sense making, and help us take reflexive responsibility for our research.

### **KEYWORDS**

Narrative Research, Time, Synchronic and Polyphonic Narratives

## **RE-STORYING NARRATIVE TEMPORALITY:**

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCHER**

“Time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain.”

(Ricoeur, 1984: 7)

“We need to restore to knowledge a lost awareness of time.”

(Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000: 92)

Our purpose in this paper is to stimulate critical reflection on the impact of time on the research practice of organizational life, and to challenge researchers to take reflexive responsibility for the research process. The above quotes demonstrate our overall goal of bringing these two thoughts together into a way of thinking that might influence the understanding and conduct of narrative research on organizational life. We begin by suggesting time is a crucial, yet often taken-for-granted aspect of research because our temporal presuppositions, particularly as we experience time in both objective and subjective ways, influence how we study organizational life. In most narrative studies of organizations time is usually dealt with in an unreflexive way, conceptualized as a passage through stages, a chronology of episodic, linear events that exist regardless of those experiencing them. There is also often an assumption that meaning is carried through time. We suggest that our experience and consciousness of time is not so straightforward and, that for reasons we will present later, we need to embrace more nuanced and dynamic notions of temporality as a means of grounding our research in the human experience of organizational life.

Our specific contribution is to offer an alternative notion of time and narrative through a way of thinking and researching we call Narrative Temporality (hereafter NT). NT provides a means of thinking more critically about how our assumptions about time influence the way we

research and narrate organizational life. NT is a nexus of the work of two writers, Ricoeur and Sartre, and an integration of our own ideas about time-consciousness and narrative research. We make two simple amendments to Ricoeur's suppositions about time and historical research in *Time and Narrative* (1984, 1988) by incorporating the reflective consciousness of temporality from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1956, 1963). Both authors, while taking differing positions, reflect upon the nature of time. Ricoeur's reflections have particular relevance for narrative researchers because he claims "speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond." He wed's Aristotle's narrative-plot theory (Emplotment) with Augustine's temporality theory (the Three-Fold Present) to suggest that we organize our present experience around themes, in which are embedded past-memory and future-expectations. Sartre's contribution is the notion of a more dynamic temporality, where the past and future cling to the present, thus time is experienced as a game of reflection/reflecting.

We begin by suggesting the form of "narrative research" (described below) of organizational life depends upon one's basic presuppositions about temporality: whether we understand time as objective or subjective, as cosmological or phenomenological, as an external or internal reality, as linear or fluid, or as an interplay between any of these dualities. Second, we provide a brief summary of narrative theory, exploring how presuppositions about time have influenced narrative research in organizations. We then offer an alternative way of thinking about narrative research -- we call Narrative Temporality (NT) -- based on our own amendments to Ricoeur's work. Finally, we explore the potential implications of NT by re-framing narrative organizational research as a *negotiated, synchronic, and polyphonic process*, in which we experience duration and connection in moments of narrative performance

(speaking/listening/reading). In other words, narrative research is a collectively constructed process over time, fluid and dynamic, and open to the interpretations of its many participants.

The amendments and ideas we propose both problemize and enrich narrative research in organizations by stimulating critical reflection about temporality, lived experience, and the relationship between the researcher, research acts, and those being researched. Such reflection draws attention to the interweaving of philosophy and practice, method and content, and highlights the need for a radically reflexive approach (Pollner, 1991). Situated in a social constructionist perspective, this means accepting that we construct and narrate the very accounts we think describe the world (Ashmore, 1989; Foucault, 1972; 1966; Lawson, 1985; Schwandt, 1994). Radical reflexivity can lead to more participative forms of narrative research in which understanding is grounded in reflective moments experienced between researcher and research participants. In exploring these issues, our intention is not to fall into the abyss of subjectivity or ‘phenomenological intellectualism’, but to search for a form of research that combines a concern for participation with a concern for the ethical responsibility of one’s interpretations of narrative organizational research. Our ethical position as narrative researchers is not derived from a love of relativism nor nihilism; rather it is one concerned with the power to tell stories of our ‘subjects’. We need to contemplate our involvement with the world AND incorporate those contemplations in our actions, because as researchers we are telling stories about people’s lives - - stories that may be taken up as representations (truth and theory) and restoried as valid (expert) knowledge. Consequently, we need to take reflexive responsibility for our research, whatever type of research we do, by “interpreting one’s own interpretations, looking at one’s own perspectives from other perspectives, and turning a self-critical eye onto one’s own authority as interpreter and author” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000: iii). By thinking reflexively about the

impact of our conceptions of time on our research, we can open the way for new forms of narrative inquiry.

## **TIME AND NARRATIVE ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH**

### **A Brief Summary of Objective and Subjective Conceptions of Time**

Conceptualizations of time are embroiled in a long-standing debate between time as a physical, cosmological, objective experience and time as a psychological, phenomenological, subjective experience. The essential difference between these positions can be illustrated by contrasting scientific with experiential conceptualizations. In the words of Robert Levine, “for the physicist, the duration of a ‘second’ is precise and unambiguous: it is equal to 1,192,631,700 cycles of the frequency associated with the transition between two energy levels of the isotope cesium 133.” (1997: 27). Modern science has mainly focused on the materiality of time, its objectivity and ability to structure social and organizational action. Since the 19th century, the drive for efficiency, speed and mass production has conceptualized time as de-natured, linear, episodic, and event-oriented. Standardized time is the key ingredient that makes possible efficiency, material abundance, and other technological successes of modern life. Time, as measured precisely in seconds and punctuated by time-driven events, (schedules, deadlines, job times, annual appraisals...) is a means of controlling and unifying action through function. Capitalism judges time by its economic value -- time is money.

“In the realm of psychological experience, however, quantifying units of time is a considerably clumsier operation. It is this usually imprecise psychological clock, as opposed to the time on one’s watch, that creates the perception of duration that people experience” (Levine, *op cit.*). From a subjective perspective, time is the experience of duration, the measurement of which is accomplished through human experience. Duration is therefore experienced in the

moment, the moment just passed, and the anticipated moment to come. Levine states that there is much evidence (e.g. Block, 1994) to show that objective and subjective assumptions of time “not only diverge from one another, but that both are subject to great distortion” (Levine, 1997: 29). In particular, the individual experience of duration passes more quickly [slowly] when experiences are pleasant [unpleasant], are not urgent [urgent], are very busy [not busy], have a variety [no variety] of tasks, and engages right-hemisphere [left-hemisphere] mode of thinking (Levine, 1997: 37-48). Of course, these experiences for the individual are also differentiated given one’s social, economic, and cultural context. Human experiences are mediated by the way we each imagine, describe, and use time (Levine, 1997: 76).

Some scholars have attempted to bridge the objective/subjective gap. Giddens (1984) for example, theorizes an interweaving of history (measured time in an unfolding historical narrative -- objective) and historicity (time constitutes being in many diffuse local narratives -- subjective). There are several time levels, from the micro day-to-day experience structures of human agency to seemingly invariant macro structures enduring over longer time periods and resistant to human agency (Giddens, 1984: 229-233).

These objective and subjective positions are reflected in organizational practice and theorizing alike. How we conceive of time has a major influence upon our ideas of what organizational life should look like, as well as how we research and theorize about organizational life. Objective conceptions of time influence our activities: the time of year and day influence what we do, for example, in Spring quarter, on Tuesdays, Cunliffe teaches in room 306 at 6.30pm. However, she also experiences that time in embodied and subjective ways; challenging discussions with students often means time passes quickly and pleasantly. We suggest narrative researchers need to develop a reflexive awareness of the relationship between objectively- and

subjectively-experienced time -- both of organizational members and themselves. For example, do we research organizational life as a snapshot in time, do we observe and measure linear events, and do we recount the chronology of someone's story? Radical-reflexivity means addressing these issues including exploring how such narratives are constructed and the impact our research narratives might have on others. This relationship between time and research in organizational life will be explored within the context of narrative research. To do so, we will re-present the contours of narrative organizational research, not as an in-depth survey, which has been done elsewhere (see Boje 1991, 1995; Clair, Chapman & Kunkel, 1996; Clair, 1997; Fairhurst & Putnam, 1999; O'Connor, 2000; and Pentland, 1999), but as a means of helping us situate our re-framed temporal perspective.

### **The Contours of Narrative Organizational Research**

Quite simply, a narrative can be seen as an oral or written "recital of a series of events...a story" (Concise English Dictionary, 1987), and narrative knowledge as making meaning through integrated and sequenced accounts (Polkinghorne, 1988; Weick, 1995). Narrative knowledge takes a storied approach: we make sense of our experience through stories, interpretive accounts of events, feelings and ideas. Narrative researchers study those stories as a means of understanding experience. Narrative organizational studies, in common with the blurring of genres in the social sciences, draws on many domains, for example, literary criticism, linguistics, rhetorics, semiotics, to address a wide range of issues spanning modern, postmodern/poststructuralist, and also interpretive perspectives (e.g., Fairhurst & Putnam, 1999; Knorr-Cetina & Amman, 1990). To clarify our position on narrative, as can be seen in the following outline, the words 'story' and 'narrative' are often used interchangeably, but we suggest they are not the same. Whereas stories, in the main, are seen have the characteristics

outlined by Gergen (1999) below, narratives do not always have such coherent plotlines or characters, but can be seen as many different ways of talking and making sense of experience. We take Alvesson's (2000) position that "all discourse is in some way narrative" (p. 93) because it is a way of making sense of lived experience -- whether technical, practical, academic or otherwise -- and that narrative accounts may or may not include stories. This is an important distinction between research taking a narrative mode of analysis and research taking a radically-reflexive stance -- the latter sees research itself as narrative.

Some researchers see narrative as a mode of communication and way of knowing and interpreting the world. This is based on the notions that: (1) we can conceptualize society and its institutions as storytelling communities, and (2) people communicate primarily through stories. Within literary and cultural studies, this position is exemplified through narratology, a structuralist examination of the underlying formal structure, coherence, sequencing, and purpose of stories (whether fact or fiction, oral or written). Stories are seen to have an internal temporality and coherence. Gergen (1999) for example, states that intelligible narratives have a number of characteristics which lend coherence: a valued endpoint or goal; relevant causally linked events ordered in a linear, temporal sequence; demarcation signs (the beginning and ending of the story); and characters with stable, coherent identities. There is also an identifiable narrative voice lending authority to the narrative (Bal, 1985). In addition, Weick and Browning (1986), following Fisher (1985a, 1985b), suggest that stories are powerful because we utilize them to determine, justify and guide our lives. When we need to judge a situation, we question whether it coheres against our own stories and determine whether characters behave in characteristic ways. So, time (sequencing) and plot (storyline) are two essential qualities in making sense of experience; our stories have a "temporal unity" (Ricoeur, 1984: ix-x), and the

plot “grasps together” and organizes goals, cause and effect, initiatives and actions, intended and unintended consequences.

The issues of coherence and chronology have also been addressed in contemporary narratologies but in a different way to that outlined above. Poststructuralist and postmodern narratologies attack coherence and chronology by problemizing and deconstructing narratives and narrative authority. Such critiques assume narratives are ongoing, dynamic texts constructed in an infinite number of ways by readers/listeners rather than storytellers (Bal, 1985; Currie, 1998; Putnam, 1996). Instead of looking for coherent story lines, shared meaning and common values, postmodern narrations look for multiple meanings, contradictions, and how narratives privilege some and exclude others. At a macro level, the political and ideological nature of meta narratives (world views such as progress through reason and science) are uncovered to expose how they control society and knowledge production and distribution by determining what is ‘true’ and ‘right’, the criteria for competence and for evaluating the legitimacy of action and knowledge (Lyotard, 1984; Knights, 1992). At the micro level, specific texts are deconstructed or individual narratives examined as a means of studying power relations. Postmodern narratologists explore how storylines may reinforce prevailing stories and marginalize and suppress other voices, (Boje, 1995; Boje & Rosile, 1997; Clair, 1998; David, 1999; Martin, 1990; Townsley & Geist, 2000).

Narratives can be seen as both fictional and creative rather than descriptions of what is real (Clifford, 1986; Mink, 1978; Van Maanen, 1988), they offer ways of ordering relations that generate their own imaginative spaces. This draws on social constructionist suppositions that language is not literal, a means of representing reality, but creative in giving form to reality (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Hatch 1997; Linstead, 1994; Watson,

1995). Our sense of self, others, social and organizational life emerges in our in our moment-to-moment, relationally-responsive, talk-entwined activities, specifically, in oral encounter and reciprocal speech (Shotter, 1993: 29). Narratives take place in many discursive times and contexts, in which we improvise, respond, draw on past narratives, and create new ones.

In the field of organization and management studies, ethnographers often use narratives as a research method to see what they might tell us about organizational life, such as culture, processes, strategy, and member identities (e.g., Abbott, 1992; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991; Boland & Schultze, 1996; Gephart, 1991; Hatch, 1997; Pentland, 1999; Rosen 1985; Smart, 1999; Weick, 1995). Using participant observation, case studies, interview data, histories, biographies, documentation from organizational members, etc. as a means of accessing narratives, researchers analyze *mimetic content*, i.e., what the stories say, and/or the *diegetic form* of stories, i.e., how the story is told, who narrates, how, a comparison of different tellings (Ryan, 1992). From the *mimetic* perspective, storylines and characters are seen to mimic or reconstruct reality, thus research is a way of establishing the link between the content of stories (narrative properties) and organizational issues. For example, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000), compare stories from street-level workers (citizen agent narratives) with the dominant scholarly narrative (state agent narrative), to highlight the different emphasis and meaning given to work discretion. Narratives are also seen as central to building community meaning. From a *mimetic/diegetic* perspective, organizations are viewed to exist as “a collective storytelling system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sense making and a means to allow them to supplant individual memories with institutional memory” (Boje, 1991:106). Boje focuses on both a mimetic analysis of story-line patterns, characters, types of stories, etc., and a diegetic analysis of who can tell (and perform) stories and where they might be told.

Typically, mimetic analysis involves some form of coding of the content of stories, while a diegetic analysis focuses on the theatrics of story performance.

Interpretive researchers also focus on both the mimetic and diegetic process of storytelling, but are more concerned with the subjective and differing interpretations of participant narratives. Interpretive analyses often identify different communities of interpretation, how each community may use different storytelling resources, tell different stories of the same event, and how these different narratives may interweave and unfold to create new possibilities for action (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998; Weick, 1995; Yanow, 1998). O'Connor (2000), in her study of narratives and organizational change, examines the stories of different organizational members: a story told at a launch event, conversations in meetings, and public statements. She specifically addresses the issue of time by suggesting that narratives are embedded in the past, present, and future, and within broader company, industry and community narratives. In other words, narratives do not just tell us about the past, (e.g., O'Connor, 1999), they also offer a way to invent the future and to re-story organizational life (e.g., Barry & Elmes, 1997; Downing, 1997; O'Connor, 1997). Weick (1993) for example, analyzes a narrative of wetland firefighters to draw conclusions about sense making and organization. He later (1996) uses the fire fighting narrative to draw parallels with the experience of educational administrators and suggest how, by using a fire fighting metaphor, they can develop more effective organizing practices.

Despite the perception that narrative researchers embrace subjective notions of time, we suggest this is an unreflexive subjectivity because researchers usually focus on how other people experience time and space and fail to consider the impact of time on the research process itself. In other words, the experience of our 'subjects' is conceptualized as a subjective passage through

stages and moments, a chronology of episodic, linear events (this happened, then this...) that we can observe, interpret, and theorize -- in an objective way. The researcher herself is outside time, sitting between the 'native' and academic worlds while interpreting, theorizing and telling a research story abstracted from the moment of enactment (Van Maanen, 1988). Thus, as organizational researchers we can distance ourselves from everyday life as we apply appropriate research methods and procedures, observe, investigate and interpret the (subjectively experienced) lives of others (Linstead, 1994). While unreflexive subjectivity (as one of our reviewers commented) allows us to enjoy music and our garden, it can be dangerous in organizational research because as researchers we may assume we have the right and ability to narrate the lived experience of organizational members. We may be 'experts' in our own lives as academics but not necessarily as members of a particular organization. We may think we are telling the stories of organizational members when we are actually narrating our own academic accounts of the lived experience of others. That academic account may then be seen as representational and be used to teach 'effective' management and organizational practices. This mimetic approach also presupposes that narratives have stable meanings and can be understood, interpreted, and translated by others in different times and contexts. In other words, there is still a degree of spatial, temporal, and interpretive objectivity. This point is important to our story because, as we demonstrate below, NT draws on specific notions of temporality to offer a radically-reflexive, diegetic approach to research.

## **RE STORYING NARRATIVE TEMPORALITY**

In the remainder of the paper, we offer an alternative way of thinking about narrative research situated in specific assumptions about the lived experience of time. As stated above, we call this way of thinking Narrative Temporality. NT builds on the work of Ricoeur (1984; 1988)

and Sartre (1956; 1963). We propose that research be re-storied as a negotiated process in which we make sense of what is going on around us through spontaneous narrative acts of consciousness (Ryan, 1992) and construction. We understand who we are and what we do as we listen, talk, and relate with others. In doing so, we make interpretations and construct our social realities in and through narratives in many moments of time (duration) and across many contexts (spaces). In other words, from a radically-reflexive NT perspective, narrative is not just a cognitive instrument (Mink, 1978), or way of studying experience, rather a way of being-in-the-world. As a basis for this new practice of narrative organizational research, we review Ricoeur's notions of time, and then draw on Sartre's work (1956; 1963) to offer two amendments.

### **Ricoeur's 'Aporetics'**

Ricoeur reviews much of the philosophical speculation about the nature of time. Starting with the work of Aristotle and Augustine, and moving to Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger, he provides an in depth discussion of various conceptualizations of time. He calls the philosophical debate between a cosmological or objective vision and a phenomenological or subjective vision of the nature of time, the 'aporetics' of temporality (an unresolved contradiction). We will focus specifically on Ricoeur's interpretation of the work of Aristotle and Augustine, because in combining Augustine's perspective of time with the Aristotle's theory of plot he provides a powerful resource for narrative research. Ricoeur's purpose is to gain a platform to resituate the conceptualization of time beyond an objective and subjective dichotomy through the use of narrative theory in the writing of historical research. We extend his work to consider the impact on research and writing about organizational life.

Aristotle focused attention on objective notions of time -- a correct and true view of time -- through his search for an absolute regular movement as the key to the definition and

measurement of time. He believed that time does indeed have a physical nature, yet can only be conceived through a human act of abstraction. He states that time has to do with the human mind's ability to insert abstract numbers "to distinguish two end points and an interval" (Ricoeur, 1988: 14) as we observe and measure physical movement. In contrast, Augustine claimed that time is experienced in more subjective ways, existing only by the "distention of the mind". Time has no extension other than the immediate experience of it; thus, the measurement of time is only possible as the human mind stores sense perceptions in memory (Pelikan, 1986). Thus, the past and future exist only in our experience of the present: the past no longer exists on its own; the future is only an anticipation; and the present is a transition from the future to the past. Ricoeur summarizes this argument: "time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain" (1984: 7). Augustine calls this the threefold present of memory, expectation, and attention: (1) memory -- in recounting events, we bring out the memory of things, as they were retrospectively ordered in the past; (2) attention -- in living events, we give momentary attention to the instant as it passes from the future into the past; and, (3) expectation -- experience invokes expectations, predictions of what we foresee unfolding in the future. We use both present and past experiences to make sense of the present (and past), and anticipate the future. For example, 'perhaps my colleagues are angry in this meeting because of the comment I just made and the heated debate in last week's meeting. So it might help future relationships if I ...' This example suggests we interpret or make sense of the present from both past and future (anticipatory) experiences, in other words, we make connections in time and across time.

Ricoeur is hard pressed to see any possible philosophical transition between Aristotle's objective time and Augustine's subjective time, but he professes that they need to be reconciled.

“The problem of time cannot be attached from a single side only, whether of the soul or of movement. The distension of the soul alone cannot produce the extension of time; the dynamism of movement alone cannot generate the dialectic of the threefold present” (Ricoeur, 1988: 21). He suggests the use of narrative can reconcile the two conceptualizations of objectively and subjectively experienced time. Ricoeur combines Augustine’s threefold present with Aristotle’s writings on plot to develop a threefold mimesis that allows a collective of humans to understand the experience of time beyond either absolutist, singular or individual, solipsist experiences. Building upon Aristotle’s notion that time may exist physically but knowledge of it is an act of human abstraction, and Augustine’s notion that abstract knowledge of time is only possible through the human act of distention (where events are understood in retrospection, in the moment, and in anticipation), Ricoeur states that the human understanding of time is really a narrative act. The understanding of narratives (whether fiction, history, or research) can therefore only be achieved through a perceived temporal plot (beginning, middle, and end).

Ricoeur relies on Aristotle’s theories of emplotment and mimetic activity to create this thesis. Aristotle tells us that narratives have two functions: first, emplotment -- as we try to make sense of our experience, we organize actions and events around plots or themes, i.e., the “active sense of organizing the events into a system” (Ricoeur, 1984: 33). Second, mimesis -- as we tell stories, we try to shape those stories and plots to mimic activity, i.e., “the active process of imitating or representing something”. From this perspective, mimetic activity dramatizes our experience (Linstead & Höpfl, 2000). Ricoeur incorporates Augustine’s phenomenology of time with Aristotle’s theories of emplotment and mimetic activity to create a *threefold mimesis* (1984: 54-71): Mimesis1 (M1), Mimesis2 (M2), and Mimesis3 (M3). Table 1 summarizes this notion.

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Insert Table 1 about here.

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Narratives exist within a “circle of mimesis” (Ricoeur, 1984: 71-76) where endpoints (post-understandings) lead back to or anticipate starting points, and incorporate our pre-understandings (of semantic structures, symbolic resources, temporal characteristics). This leads to a mid-point of emplotment or ordering. Time, according to Ricoeur, can only be understood and only gain meaning as a narrative experience within this circle of mimesis. “Time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence” (Ricoeur, 1984: 52). Ricoeur’s thesis leaves us with a means to grasp the human experience of time – and that means is narrative knowledge.

At the two extremes, objective notions of time imply that we all experience the passage of time in the same way, and can therefore generalize across contexts. Researchers working from objective notions often focus on understanding the causal connections between events, things, and/or stories. Subjective notions of time imply that the passage of time does not exist unless we experience it, and connections cannot be made across contexts. Researchers working from subjective notions may find themselves in a self-defeating position, for how can we hope to make connections if everything is experienced as “pure and unrelated presents in time” (Jameson, 1984: 72)? Neither extreme tells us much about people: about how we might live our lives, about our relationships with each other and the world, about how our imagination helps us make sense of our experience (Johnson, 1987).

How might a re-conceptualization of time, one that crosses the subjective/objective divide, relate to research in organizations? If we conceive of life lived and interpretations

occurring in-the-moment, then how can we capture the reciprocal, interwoven, spontaneous, reality-constituting, sense making activities as we carry out our fieldwork, interpretation, theorizing, and writing? We attempt to address these questions by offering two amendments to Ricoeur's work. Our amendments espouse a move from a diachronic (singular cause-and-effect understanding occurring across contexts and time) interpretation of organizational life to a more synchronic interpretation of organizational life as multiple interpretations occurring at multiple points in time and in multiple contexts – a temporality of social experience. We will go on to explore the implications of synchronic forms of narrative organizational research after discussing our amendments to Ricoeur's work.

### **Our Amendments to Ricoeur's Work**

We chose Ricoeur as a basis for our NT because of his exhaustive review of the philosophical debate on the conceptualization of time and his articulated thesis that narrative knowledge is a means of linking the objective and subjective perspectives on time. We think an approach to research grounded in NT, one based upon our amendments to Ricoeur's threefold mimesis, can cross the boundaries of the objective/subjective debate, open up new ways of thinking about experience and sense making, and help us take reflexive responsibility for our research. Essentially, this means accepting that we can construct the measurement of time in seconds, days, years, etc., i.e., a degree of objectivity. However, it is through our consciousness and experience of time that we live/narrate/make sense of our lives. Readers of this article might hear the ticking of the clock as they read, but experience the passing of time in very different ways as she/he reflects, drinks tea, draws on past knowledge, writes, talks to a student, thinks of new ideas, gets the mail... in the process of reading. Our amendments draw upon the temporality perspective of Sartre (1956; 1963) in order to re-frame narrative research of organizational life as

a fluid, dynamic, yet rigorous process, open to the interpretations (*negotiated*) of its many participants (*polyphonic*) and situated in the context of enactment (*synchronic*). We believe that by adopting a negotiated, polyphonic stance and moving toward a synchronic notion of time, research participants can construct a more wholistic and embedded narration of experience.

As we have seen, a central notion of narrative knowledge is meaningful time; that narratives are stories of our experiences in time, grounded in events or episodes which can be linked together in a temporal way, can be recounted because of plot, coherence over time, and memory -- a diachronic approach. Our amendments incorporate notions that knowledge is a social, historical and linguistic process in which the pure facticity of *social reality* is replaced by intersubjective and emerging realities and identities. In other words, we do not deny that there were past narrations or that there are things we call ‘facts’, but suggest that we interpret the past through the present and future anticipations to see those facts through acts of interpretation and social construction. For example, it is a ‘fact’ that Cunliffe’s job title is Assistant Professor. What that means -- who she is, what she does, how she interacts, etc. -- is socially constructed in her relationally-responsive interactions with students, colleagues and other people. She weaves narratives (consciously and unconsciously) to make sense about what it means to be, and to relate to others, as an ‘Assistant Professor’. Such multiply-constructed narratives may be contested, challenged, or accepted by participants. For example, Gabriel (2000) talks about the unmanaged organization where “desires and fantasies take precedence over rationality and efficiency ... spontaneous uncontrolled activities happen” (p. 125) that may be challenged by members of the managed organization. Within this realm, stories “slip furtively in and out of sight” (p. 127), may attain mythical status and, whether lies or facts, can have a powerful influence on storytellers and listeners. Stories may also incorporate poetic license (Gabriel,

2000) or a poetic recreation of reality. We suggest these stories are not just *about* reality, but *create our current experience and sense of reality in the moment of telling*. Further, if we accept radically-reflexive NT, then social life and *research itself* are constituted by multiply enacted narratives and acts of interpretation -- an ongoing accomplishment created and sustained by people living and researching their lives (Weick, 1995). So how can we capture and explain the complex, emergent and relational nature of social experience as near as possible to when it occurs? We suggest the following two amendments to Ricoeur's work may address this issue in the conduct and understanding of narrative organizational research.

First Amendment -- The Importance of Context: *Be it resolved that Ricoeur's position on narrative and time needs to be expanded to consider the context/space of the narrative performance. We are not studying already constructed narratives, rather narratives are performances in the moment, "a product of imaginative construction" (Mink 1978: 145). Life is lived in the moment, and much of our sense making also occurs in the moment.*

Gubrium and Holstein state, "as texts of experience, stories are not complete prior to their telling but are assembled to meet situated interpretive demands" (1998: 165). This implies that even though narrative knowledge is about meaningful time, the performance of narratives takes place in practical circumstances (contexts, spaces) and in particular moments (time) in which meanings may vary. Thus, the diegetic process of narrating is crucial to meaning-making: what I say, how I say it, what the listener hears, how s/he feels, how s/he reacts or responds. We may extend this argument to suggest that space and time are not necessarily separate dimensions because the unique circumstances of each moment, the context of performance and interpretation, and the specific interrelationships and connections that occur in the moment all interweave to create a unique discursive time/space. In narrating our experiences we engage in relationally-responsive activity as we attempt to make our narratives meaningful to listeners in a

particular context, to help them see connections and participate (Cunliffe, 2002). In each telling, stories may change as we respond to each other. Thus, we suggest that stories are not just chronologies (a sequence of events) but situated, responsive performances.

Does NT relate purely to oral performance or are written narratives also temporally and context-sensitive? Part of organization life is written, as is much of the research process. Organizational members and researchers create and receive written narratives; researchers study and analyze memos, minutes of meetings, personal accounts of critical incidents, our own research notes.... Reading these narrations can also be constituted as an act of interpretation in the moment of reading. We have probably all experienced new ‘insights’ as we re-read our research notes. You may create your own interpretation when reading this paper, may agree or disagree, may think we have used some poetic license – in other words, written narrations are temporally and contextually sensitive.

In summary, we suggest that narratives therefore generate unique discursive spaces that may unfold over time and interlink with other narratives in the moment to create shared discursive spaces in which meaning making occurs. Shared discursive spaces emerge because we live in communities of practice (Van Maanen, 1996) and draw on other stories (collective or individual) as comparisons and embellishments to situate our narrative in a broader discursive space or to orient the listener by linking our story to theirs. Narratives are ongoing linguistic formulations, composed in the moment, and responsive to the circumstances of a particular time/context. Narratives are not complete prior to telling, they do not have a pre-established internal coherence, but are ways of connecting and creating meaning *in the moment of telling*. Meaning making is a negotiated synchronic process because narrative performance and understanding are situated in many moments of time and context.

Second Amendment -- The Threading of Many Voices: *Be it resolved the threefold mimesis is negotiated by many voices across past/present/future time and context. The threads of earlier narratives (M1) weave together into their present emplotment (M2), and continually revise and recreate the future (M3).*

Sartre (1956: 130) distinguishes between a static linear temporality and a temporal multiplicity. In the former, time is irreversible; narrators narrate order in terms of chronology, before and after. Temporal multiplicity incorporates a dynamic temporality in which time does not separate into discrete units located before or after other events, but is experienced as an infinite dispersion of multiple afters (pasts) and before (futures). Building upon Bergson's theory of duration (*durée*), Sartre suggests the past and future cling to the present and even penetrate it (p. 135). This interpenetrating of present-past-future is experienced through a unity of perpetual referring -- a game of reflection-reflecting. So we reflect on past events, but that reflection is influenced by both the current moments in time we are experiencing, and the future moments we may be anticipating. While each narration is unique to the circumstances of the performance -- to the nuances of telling and listening -- past narrations, pre-understandings, and future or post-understandings (see Table 1) weave together to create a sense of coherent narrative.

Meaning making is therefore not necessarily a linear or a cyclical process, but from an NT perspective it is a negotiated polyphonic process: meaning occurs in the interplay between people's spontaneously responsive relations (Bakhtin, 1986) to each other and the otherness of their surroundings. Narrative researchers often explain experience by focusing on narratives told in the past, failing to recognize the impact of momentary and future experience: the threefold mimesis. The following poem offers a simple illustration of perpetual referring and threefold mimesis:

**A Minimalist Poem about Work Life**  
(Economic Press, 2000)

Hired  
Tired  
Fired

In this poem (however trite), three ‘events’ are ordered sequentially: the plot is, presumably, a history of a person’s organizational experience (M2); the story line is open to interpretation in the present -- as we read it -- and we may use our own past and present narratives to connect (M1)... ‘Who is this person, why are they tired, I’m so tired, I remember when X was fired for, does my boss think I’m tired? Maybe I’d better...’ and so on. In other words, we rewrite the story as we connect and anticipate what may happen to others and ourselves in a similar ‘story’ (M3). This example illustrates the process of plotment and perpetual referring as the reader interweaves past/present/future in her/his interpreting. Our ‘reading’ of the poem also illustrates the point made in the First Amendment, that narratives are imaginative and poetic, readers and listeners construct different meanings, and as we experience different times and contexts.

Usually, narrative organizational research gives priority to narrative properties and their relationship to the organization (e.g., managerial roles, power bases, and organizational systems) as though they exist as entities separate from those who study or live them. Chia (1996) argues this stance embraces being-realism, a preoccupation with a world of discrete, static entities in which researchers employ Bergson’s notion of the logic of the ‘Gaze’. He suggests that we need to recognize the ongoing, heterogeneous and often contested nature of lived experience, by exploring the tensions and interrelationships of meaning, realities, and theorizing, a “weak theory of organizational becoming” (p. 50) in which researchers employ the logic of the ‘Glance’. The latter is concerned with peripheral vision and motion, with life as an evolving field of experience, and knowledge situated in stories and actions. If we accept the logic of the Glance,

that our narratives are not about a pre-existing reality but that meaning is negotiated in the relationally-responsive dialogical activity taking place between researcher and other participants, then research itself may be seen as a negotiated narrative in which sense making is a synchronic process. As Voloshinov suggests, “the task of understanding does not basically amount to recognizing the form used, but rather to understanding its meaning in a particular utterance,” (1986: 68). In other words, studying narratives from a purely mimetic perspective does not necessarily tell us anything about organizational life because we can never get back to the ‘original’ because we are retelling or interpreting a story out of time/context. If, as we suggest in NT, meaning is created in narrative performance, then meaning unfolds in time and context as storytellers/listeners discuss their experiences, interweave their own narratives, and create some kind of shared narrative (Boje, Luhman & Baack, 1999; Watson, 1999), and shared sense (Shotter, 1993, 1996, 1998). This can be illustrated by a comment made in a research conversation between one of Cunliffe and a manager (K), as K comments:

“What’s curious here is the nature of our conversation. It’s not fact-laden; it’s somewhat theoretical -- yet largely experiential. I’m saying ‘this is what I do..’, you are saying ‘this is the way I’ve encountered ...’, which encourages me to say ‘Well, how do I encounter ...?’ It’s tilted towards reflection, it encourages you to keep reflecting.”

It is within the moment of storytelling that the circle of mimesis occurs -- as we combine objective and subjective time (past, present, future), stories (memories, attention, expectations), and meaning to shape actions/identities in conscious and unselfconscious ways.

### **Implications for Narrative Organizational Research**

Our position is that as narrative organizational researchers tell stories of others, we cannot avoid enacting and placing ourselves within those stories. Our interviews, case studies, research conversations, are all negotiated accounts with participants and are embedded in

subjectively experienced moments of time/context. This forms the basis of NT (see Table 2), which assumes that narrative performance (the relationally-responsive activity of narrating), as well as the researcher's reading, listening, and interpretation, all influence the process of constructing organizational knowledge.

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Insert Table 2 about here.

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Where does this leave us in terms of researching organizational life? If we accept the two amendments as proposed, at least two important implications emerge: (1) narrative organizational research is re-framed as negotiated, synchronic and polyphonic; and, (2) we need to conduct and write narrative organizational research with a reflexive and ethical responsibility for our acts.

### **First Implication for Narrative Organizational Research**

Many organizational narratives are written in the third person, to lend the account authority and legitimacy. NT recognizes the polyphony of competing narrative voices (see Richardson, 1994), stories told by many voices within different historical, cultural, and relational contexts. The research text should therefore incorporate a dialogue not a monologue, a cooperative account that emphasizes “multiple realities, fragmentation, plurality, subjectivity, and a concern with the means by which social life is represented in accounts which create rather than transmit meaning” (Linstead, 1993: 98). This means recognizing the voices of all research participants; organizational members, researcher, other organizational analysts, readers, etc. In particular, it means recognizing that we as researchers are positioned subjects; we are participants in our own organizational communities, with our own narratives and ways of talking, engaged in our own narrative performances. We are not objective observers, recorders

and interpreters of reality, but active participants in the creation of research narratives as we interweave our own community and personal narratives with those of other research participants.

An example of this can be seen below in another research conversation between Cunliffe and M, a Project Manager. The transcript of the conversation shows how Cunliffe and M create meaning as each draws on their own experience (past narratives) in the process of emplotment:

M: We tend to do a lot of that around here where we like the idea of having an expedient answer and fail to understand the reason – which then doesn't get communicated back to the rest of the organization.

A: Is that because there are no clear structures for dealing with this?

M: Yeeess. I was talking to the I. T. Manager this morning .... And I said, 'A month ago we were talking about how long it would take us to get the detailed layouts for this group, and a month ago I would have said two weeks. And yesterday in our meeting you said, 'I told you it would be four weeks' and I said 'Yeah'.' Because what I've realized is the ratio of managers to people is so high for this group .... who have to agree to every scheme and it takes time ...

A: So is it the sheer number of people – and trying to coordinate all their inputs...?

M: Yes, and some of it is because there isn't any kind of authority scheme that would help reduce those numbers. The other thing I came across recently was ...

Later I ask:

A: So how do you feel about the unpredictability and uncertainty?

This narrative shows the relationally-responsive nature of the research conversation and the influence of temporality: M draws on lived experience, not only past conversations but Cunliffe's comments and M's own reflections; Cunliffe was making sense by relating her comments to past academic narratives (previous studies, theory etc), present narratives (our interaction), and future narratives (how she'll write up this account). One's reading, in a different time and space, draws on other narratives to make sense, agree, disconfirm, or create new narrations.

This also illustrates Boje's (1995) metaphor of 'Tamara', which is based on a play in which a number of co-authored stories are told by storytellers wandering and networking simultaneously through multiple stages. Characters (in this example, A, M, I.T. Manager,

meeting participants...) move from one scene to the next while wandering and fragmenting audiences follow them. Depending upon your passage points from stage to stage (or discursive space to space) you net together very different narrations. Audience members (A, M, I.T. Manager, reviewers, and readers) do not hear a whole narrative because multiple stories are enacted simultaneously. Organizations and organizational research, like Tamara, thrive on perpetual referring (as narrations are collectively enacted and reenacted through past, present, and future) to make themselves and their environments. Threads of past organizational stories interweave with current tellings to create future possibilities in a threefold mimesis. Trying to find the original founding story or a story that gives foundation to being, is not constructive since stories are in perpetual metamorphosis as narrators add and shed, amend and invent, and re-story in multiple times and contexts. This example demonstrates how organizational narratives can be viewed as negotiated, polyphonic, and synchronic: narrative interpretation, reinterpretation, and ordering can take place in many moments of time and space, by many different narrators and audiences (cf. Richardson, 1994).

So, how do we write up these narrations from an NT perspective? Hatch (1996) addresses the issue of narrative voice through the work of Genette, suggesting that a researcher-narrator may tell the research story from four different positions: as an omniscient storyteller, an objective storyteller, as a minor character in the story, or as the main character in the story. Jago (1996) and Richardson (1999) offer examples of the latter in their commentary about how each re-storied her own life. Each weaves together stories from self and people with whom they interact to illustrate the subjective and dynamic nature of meaning making through narration. Boje, Luhman and Baack (1999) use the omniscient perspective, incorporating a number of storytelling voices in their story of encounters between three storytelling organizations (a Choral

Company, a group of researchers, the journal editor, and reviewers) thus re-framing research as a polyphonic story.

NT research means exploring how we come to construct and know our world and selves (as managers, researchers, ordinary people) in time -- in the flow of our moment-to-moment activity. We need to recognize that our research incorporates the circle of mimesis and, therefore, is not about what exists but what might be, not an expert interpretation but a polyphony of voices. The focus of narrative research therefore shifts from a focus on content or the object we are studying to the process of how we all make sense together in a context. This can lead to a democratization of the research process by emphasizing research conversations as a sense making process jointly constructed between all participants. We therefore need to study how both the subjects' and researcher's ways of making sense combine in the conversation, and when writing up our research incorporate the voices of all participants. For example, Katz and Shotter (1996) use an NT approach by focusing on 'arresting' moments in conversations between residents, medical patients, and a researcher (Katz), to explore how the narratives of each interweave to create new understandings for each participant. NT can therefore give rise to forms of inquiry grounded in collaborative or participatory forms of research (cf. Reason, 1994), research which "consists in 'seeing connections'" (Wittgenstein, 1953, no. 122) between participants in the research conversation. The outcome of NT research is not new facts or further information about the way organizations really are, but about how we live our lives, make meaning, relate, and orient ourselves to our surroundings, and in doing so, create 'realities' and 'identities' -- ways of being and acting.

### **Second Implication for Narrative Organizational Research**

We suggest that whatever approach the narrative researcher takes, she has an obligation to be up-front about herself as a positioned subject and the storyline she's working from, to avoid privileging (unconsciously or consciously) her own account and voice. As Yanow (1997: 175) suggests, this means avoiding "statements such as 'Here is what you are saying' or 'Here is the contradiction between this speech and these actions'", instead accepting our research is one narration amongst many, each with multiple readings. A narrative researcher therefore embraces moral interdependence, a moral requirement to make available communicative opportunities -- or socio-ontological resources -- to all research participants (Shotter & Cunliffe, 2002). This means recognizing our ethical place as researcher-narrator by respecting the rights of those around us to have their voice heard. Ironically, it may mean that instead of hiding behind the objective or omniscient voice (Hatch, *op cit.*), we take responsibility as one of the narrators and are up front with our 'poetic license'.

If we accept narrative organizational research as a negotiated, polyphonic, and synchronic process, we need to adopt a radically reflexive approach (Pollner, 1991), recognizing the impact of our own practices/suppositions as researcher-participant on the process of constructing knowledge about 'organizational reality'. This means questioning our assumptions and practices, the distinctions we make between what is fact and fiction, true and false, by revealing "forgotten choices, expose(ing) hidden alternatives, lay(ing) bare epistemological limits and empower(ing) voices which have been subjugated by objective discourse" (Lynch, 2000: 36). In other words, reflexive researchers take responsibility for the knowledge they construct and suggest we need to explore different stories and interpretations as a means of narrating lived experience. Each act of narrative interpretation is therefore unique, taking place in the intersection of responsive relations occurring in a particular discursive time/space. The

danger lies in interpreting our narratives as literal and using them to impose one story or storyline upon others. We must recognize that our sense making practices are embedded within our own collective narratives as researchers and organizational members.

To illustrate this point, we offer another story from Cunliffe. Her initial Ph.D. research topic focused on studying how managers work and learn under conditions of uncertainty, using chaos theory both substantively and methodologically. She recorded ‘unstructured’ interviews with managers, wrote transcripts, analyzed them (*mimetically*) from a chaos frame. It took her a long time to realize that she was telling her story, using her language, attributing her interpretations of cause and effect, i.e., her *diachronic* story. ‘Her’ managers did not talk about fractals or strange attractors. They did not live their lives around her imposed academic frames, but within responsive interaction with others. She had distanced herself from their everyday experience, not recognizing her field notes were creative interpretations on her part: an aid to reconstructing and theorizing someone else’s world out of time and space. The very act of writing itself distances us in time and space from the everyday; it captures, objectifies, categorizes, and bounds our lived experiences, both literally on the page and structurally within the conventions of language and writing. Our theories and models offer a time-frozen, diachronic, out-of-context, already occurred snapshot of what we think might be happening. They do not capture the synchronic -- and hence human and creative -- aspects of narrating and meaning-making. It was these realizations that led Cunliffe to rework her research as a negotiated narrative, a reflexive dialogical practice in which meaning is created in many moments throughout the research process.

Essentially we suggest that the writing of organizational research is embedded in our social relationships as organizational members, researchers, readers, etc. We live, construct, and

are constructed, by narratives that are entwined in cultural, social, institutional, and personal narratives (Clair, 1997). We are the main characters as we narrate our experience; we draw on past, present and future narrations to continually create our experience and identities, which is the circle of mimesis. But we do not do this in isolation, we are also characters in the narrations of the people with whom we interact (Parry, 1991), our narrations are continually negotiated in responsive ways and encompass multiple and sometimes incommensurable meanings as we relate with others around us (Cunliffe, 2001). Our narratives therefore, do not have singularity, temporal structure and chronicle continuity -- “there is not one single history, but rather histories different in their type, rhythm, mode of inscription -- intervallic, differentiated histories” (Derrida 1981: 58, cited in Currie, 1998: 79). NT attempts to draw attention to the need for organizational members and researchers to recognize the validity of other stories, the coordinated interplay of narrative performance, and the impact our narratives have in creating organizational lives and identities.

A narrative organizational researcher should therefore enact reflexive responsibility by questioning his/her intellectual suppositions, recognizing research as a symmetrical and reflexive narrative involving many voices, exploring the constitutive nature of our research conversations and ways of theorizing, and practicing reflexive writing strategies. S/he should reflexively interrogate his/her identity and relational practices to attempt more critical and expressive accounts of organizational life.

## **Conclusions**

An important dilemma emerges from an acceptance of NT. If meaning is created in the moment of speaking, then by interpreting and explaining after the event we are creating different meanings and moving further away from any ‘original’ experience. Our interpretations take

place in a different time and context, with different understandings. So, how can we capture the many moments in which meaning is created in our fieldwork, data analysis, theorizing, writing, reading, etc.? Can we actually achieve ‘closure’ in our research of organizational life?

Because participants in organizational life engage continually in narrative performance and plot (re)constructions, and because we are not all-knowing researcher-narrators, we cannot explain precisely ‘original’ events, nor tell others how to construct their worlds. We can collect stories and narrations of organizational members and participate in the sensemaking process to re-narrate past events and offer potential interpretations, for both academic and business readers, if we focus upon how stories and storytelling create meaning in a specific discursive time/context. This process involves imagination (see Johnson, 1987) because novel connections may emerge as we tell, negotiate, and retell stories. As such, narrative research can offer narrations for readers to revise, re-story, invent new, or continue with the old narratives. Our paper is offered as one narration, one way of understanding organizational research, from which readers may create their own narrations.

Tyler (1986: 125), speaking about postmodern ethnography, perhaps best sums up the goal of NT research, as producing a “cooperatively evolved text consisting of fragments of discourse intended to evoke in the minds of both reader and writer an emergent fantasy of a possible world of commonsense reality ...” In other words, in the conversational spaces created between research participants (grounded in each participant’s community) each tries to create meaning as they weave fragments of discourse into some kind of shared narratives of experiences. These narratives consist of many stories and connections created in the moment -- accounts negotiated and constructed responsively in the research conversation. This process of

negotiating and creating meaning through dialogue and readings can offer new ways both of seeing and living organizational lives.

By amending Ricoeur's work and interweaving objective (shared) and subjective notions of time through NT, we can extend notions of reality and temporality from studying the world of others, in static form, to include a reflexive exploration of the emerging experience of all participants in the research process – at different moments in time. In other words, NT re-stories narrative organizational research as a negotiated narrative about how people make meaning in their organizational lives, in which we recognize the voices and interpretations of all participants, in different moments of time and context.

Finally, we are not claiming that the narrative form should be privileged above all others, for to do so would defeat the reflexive, polyphonic values we espouse. Neither are we expounding a particular narrative research method, rather we are raising a number of issues for critical scrutiny. We do suggest NT offers the potential for developing new approaches to narrative research and can enrich our understanding of organizational life by offering different perspectives and different modes of interpretation. In particular, it can lead to more participative (cf. Reason, 1994) and reflexive forms of research practice that promote a degree of “passionate humility” (Yanow, 1997), a recognition that the researcher's voice is just one of many. In doing so, we recognize that people create their own knowledge and understandings of the way they live their organizational lives, and that those understandings should be part of the broader academic knowledge base.