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WORKPLACE NARRATIVES

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INTRODUCTION

Telling stories is an important part of our social and professional life. In fact, storytelling is so fundamental to human experience that it has been labelled as 'the beginning of consciousness' (Damasio, 1999), and as a human universal that applies across all social and cultural groups (Bruner, 1986).

Storytelling accomplishes a variety of interactional goals. We tell stories to entertain, provide information, make accusations or complaints, compete for power, justify our actions, and to build social organisation and (re)align social order (Goodwin, 1997; Holmes, 2006). But narratives also serve a deeper psychological function. People use them to make sense of themselves and their world. As Cortazzi (2001: 388) argues: "through life stories individuals and groups make sense of themselves; they tell what they are or what they wish to be, as they tell so they become, they *are* their stories." Because people are so intimately connected with their stories, narrative and life-story research also becomes a way to study people, their lives and experiences, and their hopes and aspirations. As Riessman (2003: 7) cogently puts it, "We 'become' the stories through which we tell our lives […] Telling stories configures the 'self-that-I-might-be.'"

This chapter explores the form and function of narratives in the workplace. First, it outlines how narratives have been defined and the various narrative genres we find in workplace talk, and it explains why the therapeutic aspect of storytelling should be included in work on workplace narratives. Selected excerpts from a number of workplaces are then analysed. They illustrate some of the well-documented functions of storytelling in workplace settings but they also explore some lesser-known functions, such as establishing corporate values and exposing abusive employers.

NARRATIVE FORM AND CHARACTERISTICS

Sociolinguistics has proposed influential conceptual models of narratives, and most studies refer to Labov's (1972) seminal work on narrative structure to identify the key components of an oral narrative. His prototypical narrative consists of six key components:

1. **Abstract**: a brief summary of the general propositions the story will make; it usually occurs at the beginning of the story.

2. **Orientation**: essential background information like time, place and people involved in the story.
3. **Complicating action**: the key events of the story.
4. **Evaluation**: highlighting and evaluating the point of the story.
5. **Resolution**: how the crisis/complicating action was resolved.
6. **Coda**: closing or concluding remarks.

More recently, Toolan's (2001: 4-6) argues that (some of) the following characteristics should allow us to distinguish narratives from more spontaneous conversations:

1. A narrative contains a certain degree of 'constructedness' that we do not find in spontaneous talk.
2. Narratives tend to have a certain degree of prefabrication: they contain elements we have heard before.
3. Narratives have a trajectory; they 'go somewhere', or are expected to go somewhere, which means some degree of narrative development is usually involved.
4. Most narratives have discourse units we can identify as beginning, middle and end.
5. Narratives must have a teller and the teller is always important.
6. Narratives usually make use of displacement; they refer to events that are removed, in space and time, from the speaker and addressee(s).

The telling of personal narratives in the workplace is usually a joint discursive accomplishment where individual narrators' input should be seen as an integral part of the story. Ochs and Capps (2001) propose a continuum between what they call the 'default narrative' with only one active teller at the one end of the continuum, and a dynamic co-constructed narrative with multiple tellers at the other end. They argue that the 'default narrative', which has been the object of most research, is in fact quite rare in natural conversation. And even when there is seemingly only one storyteller, other group members are in fact also taking part in the construction of the story. By using subtle linguistic or paralinguistic means, audience members become co-participants in the development and interpretation of individual (workplace) narratives (Fasulo & Zucchermaglio, 2008).

Another characteristic feature of narratives that has been identified by many scholars is tellability (Ochs & Capps, 2001). In order for a story to avoid the 'so-what'-reaction and not be deemed pointless, it must be tellable. This means it must somehow deviate from expected norms. Bruner (1991) calls it a breach from the unmarked script of everyday life: for a story to be deemed tellable, it must explore the boundary between the ordinary and the exceptional. Or, as argued by Thornborrow & Coates (2005: 11), to achieve tellability, "a story needs to reach a moment where the unexpected and unusual erupts from out of the mundane and predictable." In abuse

narratives, tellability is not an issue. By their very nature, these stories breach the unmarked script of everyday life and will therefore always be deemed tellable. The only caveat is that tellability is compromised by the unacceptability of the events (Shuman, 2005), but a trauma narrative can never be deemed pointless or irrelevant.

NARRATIVE GENRE AND FUNCTIONS

Linde (1993) proposes a distinction between narratives and life stories. While narratives can be anything from mundane stories about trivial everyday activities to horrifying accounts of near-death experiences, a life story is usually a discontinuous discourse unit that is told in separate stories over an extended period of time. It expresses the teller's sense of self: who we are in relation to others and how we came to be what we are. This means life stories are used to claim and negotiate group membership(s), but they also serve therapeutic functions in that they help the narrator understand and come to terms with his/her past and create a sense of coherence. Landmark events such as 'choice' of profession (voluntary or enforced), marriage, divorce, and religious conversion would often be important themes in life stories. The migrant worker narratives in this chapter could be referred to as life stories. They deal with identity and notions of 'self' and 'other', and with notions of belonging, or not belonging, and what it means to (not) have a 'home' and be confined to a diasporic life separated from your loved ones.

Scholars have pointed to at least five key functions of storytelling (Medved & Brockmeier, 2008). First, it creates coherence in that it "synthesizes personal experiences and sensations that may otherwise be disconnected and random" (p. 61). Second, narratives serve a distancing function. As Bruner (2002: 89) argues, "we distance ourselves from the immediacy of events by converting what we've encountered into story form." Third, narratives serve a communicative function. They connect the teller to his/her audience so that the narrator's universe becomes shared and all participants become engaged in the construction of narrative events. Fourth, narratives serve an evaluative function in that they provide a framework for evaluating past events. They give perspective but also an opportunity to re-evaluate and suggest alternative interpretations and an alternative course of action. Finally, narratives serve an explorative function and allow us to explore two sides of human experience: the real and the possible. As Medved and Brockmeier (2008: 67) argue, "the explorative function of narrative is about probing and extending the horizon of human possibilities."

Marra and Holmes (2004: 64) have identified a variety of functions that apply particularly to workplace narratives. They found that stories are used to entertain, educate, socialise, and inform, and to express individual employees' preoccupations, perspectives and feelings. Workplace narratives also contribute to individual and group identity formation, they express solidarity and face needs, and they mark social boundaries. Holmes (2006) has identified anecdotes as particularly salient in

workplace talk. Anecdotes often appear in the form of (welcome) digressions from core business talk, and they typically function as a means for negotiating the public-private interface. Other narrative genres in workplace talk include habitual narratives in which tellers embark on events that happened (repeatedly) in their past. Habitual narratives tend to be less dramatic and would sometimes be used to explain or legitimise a certain course of action. Argumentative narratives are also common in workplace talk. They usually deviate from prototypical narratives and their function is to put forward an opinion, or to challenge somebody's point of view (see De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012 for an overview of narrative genres).

De Fina (2003) argues that the characteristic features of the narrative genre make it "particularly apt to become the locus of expression, construction and enactment of identity" (p. 11). Among the narrative features that add something important to discourse-based theories of identity is temporality (Linde, 1993). Narratives create a sense of identity coherence because they tend to include connectedness and temporal unity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Bruner (1990) notes that during the 70s and 80s, psychologists began to see the 'self' as a storyteller and focus their attention on the narrative construction of identity. Part of this new narrative movement is also the realisation that the 'self' is not a static unit but a social discursive construction that emerges in narrative form. Narratives thus become essential in the interpretation of human experience "because experience itself becomes intelligible to humans only when they narrate it" (De Fina, 2003, p. 17).

THERAPEUTIC NARRATIVES

A key assumption behind narrative therapy is that we live storied lives (White, 1995). People are encouraged to tell their stories to make sense of their experiences because our stories constitute us and shape our lives and relationships (Brown and Augusta-Scott, 2007). Narrative therapy is influenced by post-structuralism, social constructionism and Foucault's (1984) essays on power and knowledge. It focuses on identity as socially constructed in the narrative context, and it claims that all individual stories are social stories, shaped by dominant ideologies of power and cultural conventions. It refers to Foucault to show how people in positions of power construct dominant stories that allow them to remain in power. This echoes with some of the narratives in this chapter in which migrant women tell how their employers construct them as stupid, poor and vulnerable. This means their stories are circumscribed by the employer and workplace narratives therefore become a means for migrant workers to challenge dominant stories and co-author more helpful ones (Brown and Augusta-Scott, 2007).

A justification for combining narrative therapy with a sociolinguistic approach to narrative analysis is that both approaches emphasise the use of language. White (1995) cautions that language is fraught with ambiguity and misinterpretation; it is full of culturally derived meanings that may distort how people see themselves

(Payne, 2006). Narrative therapy takes conscious effort to escape these meanings and can therefore help people who have been abused or bullied in the workplace to become aware of how they have internalised their employers' or colleagues' demeaning discourses (Ladegaard, 2017; Simons & Mawn, 2012).

A problem-saturated description of past events - the narrator shares his/her story and thus externalises the problem – is essential in narrative therapy. The aim of using 'externalising language' is for the teller to separate his/her identity from the problem, and to reconstruct the trauma/bullying as an external event. It is a common reaction for abused migrant workers to turn the problem inwards and argue that they have been mistreated because they are 'unworthy to be respected' (Ladegaard, 2013). In such cases, storytelling serves to repair damaged identities (Nelson, 2001) and propose alternative stories.

WORKPLACE NARRATIVES

Narratives as Icebreakers and Entertainment

One function of workplace narratives is their role as icebreakers, or as entertaining diversions from the tediousness of business talk. Excerpt 1 provides an example (transcription conventions in the Appendix).

Excerpt 1[i]

Nigel, IT support team leader in a Danish IT Service Centre and Carola, IT supporter in the Finnish daughter company, in a Same-Time Teleconference. They introduce themselves and then they engage in small talk before the business talk in initiated (original in English).

1.	Nigel:	how is the weather up where you are?
2.	Carola:	eh: I've left today
3.	Nigel:	sorry (1.0) yeah, it's pretty ugly here
4.	Carola:	it's raining and it's eh: so grey, I eh: took [went] home it's the same
5.	Nigel:	well yes, it's intolerable here, there's no other word for it, terrible
6.	Carola:	well I don't think we'll have a white Christmas
7.	Nigel:	you don't?
8.	Carola:	no, eh: not fully
9.	Nigel:	it's a problem this conception all my friends from England have
10.		about Denmark (1.0) they'll go like 'so oh, you'll get a white
11.		Christmas this year' (1.0) 'no, probably not'
12.	Carola:	[laughs]
13.	Nigel:	on the news they do this eh: percentage chance of a white Christmas
14.		and at one point about two weeks ago they were talking about 20%,
15.		and er: now it's gone down to 5%
16.	Carola:	okay [laughs]

Because of his role as support team leader, Nigel would often chair meetings and

teleconferences. He is from the U.K. and he fully lives up to the stereotype that the British love to talk about the weather. In meetings, particularly if new colleagues are involved (as in Excerpt 1), he would engage in small talk first. The story he tells to illustrate his point (lines 9-11) is very short and yet, has most of the components Labov (1972) proposes as essential in narrative. It has the **orientation** ('all my friends from England', line 9), the **complicating action** ('this conception they have about Denmark', 'you'll get a white Christmas', lines 10-11), and the **evaluation/resolution** ('no probably not', line 11). We could also argue that the additional information about the likelihood of a white Christmas (lines 13-15) constitutes the **coda**.

The anecdote about British people's misperception of Denmark is triggered by Carola's remark in line 6 that there won't be a white Christmas in Finland. It elaborates on a point that has been made, as well as filling a gap during the initial stages of the teleconference. The colleagues do not know each other and the anecdote and the small talk therefore also works as an icebreaker. Nigel is trying to establish rapport with a colleague who initially is not very talkative. Carola's laughter (line 12, 16) suggests that the anecdote has worked and a quiet, slightly reticent colleague is slowly warming up to conversation.

Excerpt 2 shows how workplace narratives may be used to entertain and create a more relaxed atmosphere. The colleagues are discussing what they do when they get a service request from somebody they do not know in one of the company's subsidiaries.

Excerpt 2

<u>Lucas</u> and <u>Britt</u>, IT controllers in the IT Service Centre of a global business corporation. Five more colleagues were in this focus group interview, which was set up to discuss work practices and conventions (original in Danish).

1.	Lucas:	if I get a service call from somebody I really don't know, well
2.		then I know that John he knows this person well so I'll ask him
3.		what he or she is like […] I've actually communicated once with
4.		an Italian thinking that it was a really nice girl [someone laughs]
5.		and then when I came down to Italy it turned out it a man with
6.		curly hair [general laughter] it wasn't actually very funny
7.	Britt:	is that really true? [laughs]
8.	Lucas:	in fact I tried the same thing in the old job I had (1.0) for about
9.		half a year I communicated with a German, and because of the
10.		name I'd imagined that this person was a very beautiful black
11.		girl or something like that, and then when I came down there
12.		[somebody laughs] it was a giant negro [sic] and he just said
13.		'G'day Lucas' [general laughter] I hadn't understood a damn
14.		thing [general laughter]
15.	Britt:	it's important to meet people
16.	Lucas:	but what I do now is I go [to the intranet] and check their
17.		photographs sometimes

Prior to and in this excerpt, the colleagues discussed how difficult it is to communicate with a faceless global citizen. They need markers of national or ethnic identity in order to frame their communication, and the colleagues thus refute the idea that global business communication is uniform and 'neutral' and can be directed at anybody. Lucas' story consists of two personal anecdotes, which illustrate how important gender is when you communicate with unidentified colleagues in the virtual workplace. While the anecdotes make an important contribution to the discussion – that national and gender stereotypes are used to provide orientation in virtual communication – their function is to entertain more than anything. As Holmes (2006: 169) argues, "like humour and small talk (with which they frequently overlap), they provide relief from the core business of the workplace."

The evidence that Lucas' story functions as intended is the frequent use of laughter (lines 4, 6, 7, 12, 14). Lucas often takes on the role as the entertainer in meetings and other business-related activities in this workplace. Therefore, his story is expected to be funny and prior to both anecdotes, a colleague laughs even before there is any indication that this will be funny (lines 4, 12). Lucas adorns his story with entertaining details, such as 'a man with curly hair' (lines 5-6) and 'a giant negro' who just said 'G'day Lucas' (lines 12-13). The information is not particularly relevant to the storyline but it serves an important intragroup function by adding humour to a business-related discussion. The colleagues recognise this by laughing loudly (lines 6, 13), and this recognition may be the cue that encourages Lucas to present himself as the anti-hero and admit that he 'hadn't understood a damn thing' (lines 13-14). He ridicules himself and in subsequent lines not reported here, he tells the group how he was flirting with these presumed good-looking female colleagues in writing, only to discover that they were both men. Therefore, the coda of the story is important: that Lucas now checks the photographs of new colleagues on the intranet before he communicates with them. The story shows how workplace anecdotes may serve an important socio-pragmatic function and contribute to workplace culture.

Reinforcing Ingroup Cohesion

Another important function of workplace narratives is that they reinforce ingroup cohesion. They bring colleagues together as a group, often in contrast to colleagues in comparable outgroups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Excerpt 4

Nigel, IT support team leader; Anna and Jesper, IT supporters. Four more colleagues were in this focus group interview, which was set up to discuss work practices (original in English).

1. Nigel: I'd say I certainly have experienced that where I, I sent an email
2. to somebody in Germany (1.0) and then I was approached by
3. somebody else, from the, from [Company A] Germany to say (0.5)

4. they didn't understand what you've written in the email
5. Anna: yeah
6. Jesper: mhm
7. Nigel: so there I had to resend it with (0.5) as you said, not baby
8. English//
9. Anna: //no no//
10. Nigel: //but a lot more simple
11. Anna: yeah [general laughter]

Excerpt 4 is part of a discussion about the use of English as corporate language. The colleagues agree that communication problems are caused by 'the other', not by them. Nigel, who is from the U.K., tells the group how his language is perceived as incomprehensible by his German colleagues so he is being asked to simplify it. The term 'baby English' was introduced earlier by Anna who explains: "when you know they're on a lower level, I put my level down when I know that they're not that well in English" (original in English). Anna is Danish and although her English is perfectly comprehensible, it is far from grammatically correct. Yet, she sees her English language skills as superior to those of her Southern European colleagues with whom she allegedly 'puts her English down'. Nigel's anecdote (which is also argumentative in nature) serves to confirm this stereotype. Despite being a native speaker of English, he is being asked to simplify his language to accommodate to the German colleagues' subpar language skills. German colleagues are discursively constructed as linguistically inferior, and Nigel's story provides the evidence. This leaves the colleagues in the Danish company as superior and Nigel's story therefore also serves to reinforce a positive ingroup identity (Hogg & Abrams, 2003; Ladegaard, 2011a).

Reinforcing Workplace Culture and Corporate Values

Storytelling in the workplace also serves as a means to share and disseminate cultural norms and corporate values. Natalie is Head of Sales & Project Proposals in the headquarters of a large multinational entrepreneurial company. She talks to two colleagues who complain that the company has made a statement that they would prioritise certain issues, but has done nothing to address the problems.

Excerpt 5

Natalie, Head of Sales of Project Proposals; Peter and Niels are both engineers and work in another department (original in Danish).

1. Natalie: there's something I'd like to tell you, you know I lost this guy
2. Hans Christian Nissen, he worked for me, you know the guy
3. who died
4. Peter: really? (0.5) oh my goodness
5. Natalie: Sunday it was (0.5.) didn't you see it on the news channel?
6. Niels: yes I did see it but then I thought//
7. Peter: //yes I did think (0.5)

8. Natalie: ah: his wife called me Monday morning (0.5) yesterday it was
9. (0.5) and she told me he was dead
10. Peter: okay
11. Natalie: and she was confused of course, right and didn't know who
12. she should talk to, she'd like to talk to somebody from PFA
13. [Pension Fund], you know so I promised I'd call HR and ask,
14. and you know HR were just absolutely amazing, they just
15. took over completely
16. Niels: really?
17. Natalie: and found the names and took care of everything, you know
18. Bodil Sørensen and Carina Nordtoft, they just took care of it
19. and they would call the wife and everything
20. Peter: okay

Natalie is 'doing being a leader' in this excerpt (Ladegaard, 2011b) and her story takes the form of an argumentative narrative, which is told to back up claims that may be seen as controversial or disputable (Schiffrin, 1994). The company's senior management is being criticised for being inactive, so Natalie tells a story to counter the evidence presented by the two colleagues. Note how she refers to the deceased colleague: "I lost this guy", "he worked for me" (lines 1-2). She personifies the company and when somebody passes away, it is a personal loss. The point of the story is presented in line 14: "HR were absolutely amazing." A company that is criticised for not caring for their employees is positioned through storytelling as caring and considerate. Thus, Natalie's story is constructing a workplace culture and disseminates corporate values to colleagues. As evidenced by other examples in the dataset, the company is working to portray the image of a caring organisation and Natalie's story works towards consolidating this image. So, rather than openly disagreeing with her two male colleagues in their criticism of the company, Natalie uses storytelling as an indirect disagreement strategy, and she uses her personal experience as evidence because personal stories are difficult to refute (Tusting, Crawshaw & Callen, 2002). Holmes (2006: 186) argues that storytelling provides a "legitimate and acceptable, but unofficial and off-record, outlet for dissatisfaction, jealousy, or irritation in the workplace." Natalie's story illustrates this point as she uses it to counter her colleagues' criticism.

The next example also illustrates how storytelling can be used to disseminate corporate values and workplace culture. Paul is IT Support Team Leader, and he is discussing with a group of IT supporters why some European colleagues are more difficult to work with than others.

Excerpt 6

Paul, IT support team leader during a focus group discussion with his support team (original in Danish).

1. Paul: I can provide a very specific example from France where I

2. was in a meeting with 3-4 colleagues and their boss, and we
3. were discussing how they could estimate prices when they sell
4. to their customers, and eh: of course I had to know how they
5. wanted that done so I could set up the system to handle all the
6. regulations they had and eh: it was the boss who eh: presented their
7. eh: terms and conditions and told me how everything worked, types
8. of customers etc etc, and those 3-4 colleagues they just sat there
9. nodding and were completely passive, and eh: he was very
10. convincing and I was like okay, I took notes and then he left
11. and the four colleagues stayed behind and then they told me
12. 'now we'll tell you how it **really** is', and then we started all
13. over [general laughter] and I noted down and then I was in
14. a dilemma because how should I develop the system? According
15. to what the boss had said or how it was in the real world?

Paul's question in lines 14-15 is rhetorical, and the answer (which is never explicitly stated) underlines the point of this argumentative narrative: they need to respond to 'the real world', not to what an autocratic leader in France says. This story is used to convey negative outgroup stereotypes but it is also used to identify power difference as a major problem in their external communication. As evidenced in other types of data, the colleagues are proud of working for an organisation that has a flat anti-hierarchical management structure where everybody is allegedly treated the same, and secretaries and CEOs alike are called by their first name. Therefore, the power difference between the French employees (representing 'the real world') and their CEO becomes an obstacle to successful intergroup communication.

The French colleagues are implicitly mocked: "they just sat there nodding and were completely passive" (lines 8-9), and the assumption behind this statement is that 'we' are not like 'them' (Ladegaard, 2011a). The story presents hierarchical organisational structures as problematic and thus, indirectly hails an anti-hierarchical management structure as effective. After Paul's story, Lucas sums up the moral by saying: "but that's the thing with French culture […] they have great respect for their boss and they don't contradict [him]" A specific management problem is perceived as a cultural issue (Schnurr & Zaytz, 2012). National culture becomes a universal explanation for all behaviour, thus ignoring other potentially significant explanations.

Narratives of Denigration and Humiliation

I now turn to a different type of narrative about the workplace, which has received less attention in the literature. However, abusive employers and workplace bullying are increasingly recognised as a significant problem so there are good reasons for examining therapeutic work-related narratives.

Migrant workers arriving at a church shelter in Hong Kong[2], are interviewed by caseworkers, and invited to share their stories in a session with other migrant women.

Domestic migrant worker (DMW) narratives would often be in the form of habitual narratives in which a narration of past events (like recurrent abuse and bullying) is used to explain their current predicament.

Excerpt 7

Vera and Ruth, both Filipina migrant workers, and a male interviewer/volunteer (Int). One more migrant worker was in this sharing session (original in English).

1.	Vera:	they [the employers] always get mad at me (2.0) I don't know
2.		how to speak English [laughs] I don't know how to speak
3.		English fluent
4.	Int.:	don't worry, it's fine
5.	Vera:	because I'm only a high school graduate [laughs]
6.	Int.:	don't worry, that's fine
7.	Vera:	so after two days, my employer, my employer's always
8.		getting mad at me, and the third day, she hit me in my back
9.		because she's (1.5) I don't know (1.5.) and then
10.	Int.:	so she hit you with what?
11.	Vera:	she hit me with her hand
12.	Int.:	okay, for doing what?
13.	Vera:	I just keep quiet
14.	Int.:	yeah
15.	Vera:	because I don't want to (1.0) go home because I have many
16.		(1.0) *utang*
17.	Ruth:	yeah, she has a lot of loan
18.	Int.:	so debt again, yeah
19.	Vera:	until until (3.0) because from January 3rd to January 12th, she
20.		hit me two times and she even dragged me three times, but I
21.		don't complain because I don't want to go home, I don't have
22.		money to go home, and at the night of January 12th she come
23.		home and she's getting mad at me (0.5) just because of a simple
24.		mistake I did not put the food on the table when she come home
25.		from the office, and then she (0.5) speak bad words she's always
26.		telling me 'poor Filipino, stupid Filipino, go home', she always
27.		act like that since I came here

Vera's story provides a typical example of the way DMWs position themselves through narrative (Wortham & Gadsden, 2006). Vera's self-presentation makes sense in a culturally hegemonic society where migrant workers are consistently marginalised and the objects of blatant discrimination (Constable, 2007; Ladegaard, 2017). As Schiffrin (1996: 170) argues, "our identities as social beings emerge as we construct our own individual experiences as a way to position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations." Thus, our narrative self-construction is closely intertwined with predominant attitudes and stereotypes in the society in which we live. Therefore, Vera denigrates herself; she apologises for her alleged inability to speak proper English (lines 1-3) despite the fact that she is perfectly fluent, and she

positions herself as a lowly high school graduate (line 5).

Vera's self-presentation as inferior is probably also the reason she does not defend herself when she is being assaulted (line 13). Constable (2007: 51) argues that physical assault reflects how DMWs historically have been, and in many ways still are, perceived in Hong Kong (and elsewhere). They are seen as household commodities, who/which can be "inspected, bought, traded, owned, [and] generally objectified," and this may explain why physical assault is still shockingly common. Domestic battering is usually explained by reference to power and control: one party in a domestic dispute is trying to gain power and control over another by means of violence (Augusta-Scott, 2007). However, it is also possible that physical abuse is used in lieu of language. Communication problems are often reported in DMW narratives. It is usually the Chinese women of the household who deal with domestic workers and they often do not speak (much) English. DMWs do not speak (much) Chinese and in the absence of a common language, it is more likely that employers may resort to violence.

Although she knows she has done nothing wrong, Vera keeps quiet when she is assaulted (line 13) because she does not want to go home (line 15), and for fear of retaliation (lines 23-24). Her story portrays the identity of the subservient maid who tolerates her employer's abusive behaviour because she is in debt (lines 15-16). She took out loans to pay the extortionate agency fees and when the contract is terminated prematurely, she has two concerns: first, that she cannot pay her agency fees, and second, that she cannot provide for her family. As Yeoh and Huang (2000: 422) argue, "far from eroding notions of family ties, diasporic existence often serves to strengthen women's gendered identifications as sacrificial sisters, daughters, mothers, and wives."

Vera's narrative also shows how references to poverty and stupidity are used to denigrate DMWs. The reference to poverty reiterates the fact that power and access to financial resources are intrinsically linked, so mocking DMWs for their poverty is a reminder of their vulnerability (Bales, 2012). They do not put up a fight against abusive employers because they cannot afford to lose their jobs (Simons & Mawn, 2012). The reference to stupidity is ironic because Filipina DMWs tend to be better educated than their lower-middle-class female employers in Hong Kong. However, as other narratives have shown, the reason for individuals or groups to voice negative outgroup stereotypes may be to emphasise intergroup differentiation (Hogg & Abrams, 2003).

Therapeutic Narratives

An important aspect of workplace narratives is that they serve a therapeutic function. Employees, who have suffered under the hands of abusive employers, or from bullying from fellow colleagues, may use storytelling as a means to come to terms

with what happened and receive help from their audience to construct more helpful counter-narratives. Excerpt 8 provides an example.

Excerpt 8

Ayu, Nadia, Siti, and Rina, all Indonesian migrant workers, and a male interviewer/volunteer (Int). Four more migrant workers were in this sharing session (original in Bahasa).

1.	Ayu:	I, I worked in my employer's house as a housekeeper, I clean
2.		seven cars
3.	Nadia:	**seven only** //[general laughter]//
4.	Ayu:	//seven cars// seven cars, then the only thing I don't
5.		like about them is, even though I wasn't wrong, instead of
6.		clarifying they just beat me (1.0) and then after they hit me they
7.		ask me to smile [general laughter]
8.	Siti:	crazy
9.	Aya:	and then and then, everything is tough, they count all my work
10.		by the minute
11.	Rina:	they time all your work?
12.	Ayu:	yes, their house is quite big (2.0) there are seven people in that
13.		house (2.0) there are four floors, seven cars, the only domestic
14.		helper there is me (1.5) if I made a mistake and apologised I'll be
15.		beaten instead, that's why I can't stand working there and finally
16.		I ran away (0.5) reported to the police […] there were two
17.		children in the house (3.0) but I never touched them, they forbid
18.		me to touch them, they said I'm dirty
19.	Siti:	mm: race discrimination
20.	Ayu:	then I usually sleep at 2:30 at night and begin working again at
21.		8 o'clock in the morning
22.	Siti:	2:30 in the morning?
23.	Ayu:	yes
24.	Nadia:	**2:30 *lah:***

In Excerpt 8, Ayu's friends show their support and sympathy through single words, exclamations and minimal response. In line 3, Nadia shows her support through a loud ironic exclamation, "seven only", followed by laughter from other participants. The laughter in line 7 suggests that the women find the employer's demand - that Ayu should smile after they hit her - outrageous, even hilarious. Siti's brief comment, "Crazy" (line 8), and Rina's question "they time all your work?", also suggest indignation and outrage and encourage Ayu to continue her story. She tells her peers that she was not allowed to touch her employer's children because she was accused of being dirty (lines 17-18), a comment which leads Siti to label the employers as racist (line 19). And when she tells the group that she worked until 2:30 am, Siti's question suggests disbelief (line 22) and Nadia's loud exclamation, including the Cantonese sentence-final particle *lah:* (line 24), suggests shock. In Cantonese, *lah:* signifies the end of a turn, but when DMWs use it, the semantic implication has changed to something like 'No kidding!'

Throughout Ayu's story, the feedback from her peers helps her to reinterpret the events so that she comes to see herself as a victim. The feedback provides the moral and emotional support she needs to reconstruct a counter-narrative, which labels her employers as racist and abusive. Because our stories constitute us and shape our lives (Brown & Augusta-Scott, 2007), it is essential that Ayu gets support to question the abusive discourses she was subjected to in her employer's house. As we get to the end of the sharing session and the women are asked what they intend to do, Ayu is committed to pursuing a case against her employer. Thus, storytelling may help employees to question taken-for-granted dominant stories and reconstruct a different narrative that will help them become agents in their own life stories.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Holmes (2006) argues that narratives are generally regarded as "dispensable, irrelevant, or peripheral, and in some cases even distracting in the workplace context." The evidence that supports this point is the fact that colleagues would often use discourse markers, such as 'to get back to the point', or 'enough (of that)', after the narrative is completed. However, the fact that workplace anecdotes are often off-topic digressions from core business does not mean that they are dispensable. Teambuilding and relational work are essential in any organisation (Fletcher, 1999) and storytelling plays an essential role in these processes. In her analysis of job interviews for low-status positions in the U.K., Roberts (2013) shows that applicants with an immigrant background are usually not successful because they are unable to produce narratives during the interview which conform to Anglo-American conventions of storytelling. And P. Holmes (2015) shows that a significant problem for new immigrants in New Zealand workplaces is that they do not know how to tell stories and respond appropriately to small talk during coffee and lunch breaks. Thus, we may assume that storytelling is peripheral, but research shows that when employees do not master the skills of telling and interpreting workplace narratives, they are likely to suffer exclusion or marginalisation.

If we consider the therapeutic component of narrative, it becomes even more pertinent that workplace narratives should not be perceived as dispensable and peripheral. For DMWs who have suffered under the hands of abusive employers, or for colleagues who have been belittled through bullying by their colleagues (Hoel & Einarsen, 2015), storytelling may be a way for them to come to terms with traumatic workplace experiences and get support from their peers to question the demeaning discourses they have been subjected to, and propose more helpful stories that will help the victim to regain self-confidence. Trauma destroys the self (Herman, 1997) and employees who have been subjected to abuse or bullying need to rediscover their own resources and potential. The therapeutic use of narratives may provide people with "experiences in which they can give voice to their traumas, evaluate their interpretations, reconsider their identity conclusions, and re-author their lives from victimhood to

survival and beyond" (Duvall and Béres, 2007: 233).

One of the most important potentials of workplace narratives is arguably their ability to bridge the gap between the personal and professional dimensions of our identity (Holmes, 2006). They provide a legitimate outlet for negative emotions, they entertain and contribute to teambuilding, they reinforce ingroup identity, and communicate corporate values. But they are also instigators of change, both at the personal and the corporate levels, because as people tell, they *become* their stories.

FURTHER READING

De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2015) provides comprehensive coverage of the latest advances in narrative analysis, from work on social media and organisational and classroom narratives to small stories research.

Thornborrow & Coates (2005) analyses the use and functions of narratives in a wide range of socio-cultural contexts. One chapter (Holmes & Marra 2005) deals with workplace narratives.

Brown & Augusta-Scott (2007) provides a compilation of current narrative therapy research in a range of therapeutic contexts.

Shuman (2005) discusses a number of potentially problematic issues in narrative research, including empathy with the teller and entitlement claims.

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APPENDIX

Transcription Conventions

Bold = pronounced with stress/emphasis

Italics = Tagalog/Bahasa/Janavese

[it's a] = word(s) inserted by the transcriber to ease comprehension

, = short pause, less than 0.5 second

(2.0) = pause in seconds

'give me that' = reporting direct speech

: (as in ah:) = the vowel sound is prolonged

xx = incomprehensible

// = interruption; //as I said// = overlapping speech

? = question/rising intonation

[…] turn(s) left out

[i] Narratives presented come from research conducted in both Denmark and Hong Kong (see Ladegaard 2007, 2012 and 2017).