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THE CLAIM OF UNIQUENESS

Researchers have noticed that organizational cultures, and in particular organizational stories, carry a claim to uniqueness--that an institution is unlike any other. For example Selznick (1957:139) argues that it is vitally important for an organization to define its distinctive competence, that is, its ability to do a kind of work that other organizations cannot do. This distinctive competence then becomes the focal point of the institution's culture. In a similar vein, Clark (1972:178) argues that an organization's history, as it is handed down to subsequent generations of employees, becomes " . . . a collective understanding of unique accomplishment." Evidence of a claim to uniqueness has been found in a variety of organizational cultures, including an Israeli community center (Yanow, 1982), a junior college (Clark, 1960), and electronics corporations (Wilkins, 1979). Even occupational subcultures, such as doctors, make claims of unique competence in order to justify autonomy and freedom from oversight (Van Maanen and Barley, in press).

Some organizational culture researchers have not stressed the claim to uniqueness. Instead they have simply presented evidence that organizational cultures serve important functions, such as the generation of commitment (e.g., Pettigrew, 1979; Ouchi, 1981; Martin and Powers, in press), cognitive

sense-making (e.g., March and Simon, 1958; Bougon, M., Weick, K., and Binkhorst, D., 1977; Weick, 1979; Martin, 1982; Porac and Salancik, 1982), and boundary creation (e.g., Goffman, 1963; Ouchi, 1980; Wilkins, in press).

Each of these functions is consistent with a claim to uniqueness. Strong commitments are often justified by claims that one entity has desirable attributes, not characteristic of others (e.g., Kanter, 1972). Cognitive sensemaking involves deciphering an organizational history that is by definition unique to a particular setting. Boundary definition is the creation of a distinction between one institution and others.

Organizational cultures are not alone in their emphasis on uniqueness. Individuals prefer to think of themselves as unique beings (e.g., Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). One aspect of emotional maturing is the process of individuation, that is, distinguishing one's unique, personal self from other members of society. (Horney, 1937; Fromm, 1941; Maslow, 1962; Zimbardo, 1969; Maslach, 1974). National chauvinists distinguish their own country from others and emphasize its distinctiveness (Geertz, 1973). Societal and religious cultures also stress uniqueness and claim to be superior or to offer the one true faith.

In spite of these claims to uniqueness, cultural manifestations share common elements and express common concerns. For example, fairy tales, legends, and religious myths exhibit a remarkable similarity in content and structure (e.g., Malinowski, 1962; Jung, 1968; Bettelheim, 1970; Barthe, 1972; Levi-Strauss, 1979). Thus, a culture's claim to uniqueness is

expressed through cultural manifestations that are not in fact unique. This is the uniqueness paradox.

Given these findings about culture in other arenas, it would not be surprising to discover evidence of the uniqueness paradox in organizational cultures. Because studies of this topic have, in the interests of "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), focused intensively on one or a very few contexts, we are just beginning to understand the extent to which substantially different organizations share common cultural elements. To date, we do not know what the content of a common organizational mythology might include. Research on the common elements of religious mythologies, legends, and fairy tales has lead to insights, for example, about the development of the human mind, belief systems, and the structure of societies. Analyses of the common elements in organizational cultures might yield comparable insights.

This paper is a first attempt to define the content of the common elements of organizational story collections and to address the question of why these particular stories have survived, while others have not proliferated widely.

In what follows, we begin by presenting seven stories that make a tacit claim to uniqueness. We show that these seven stories occur, in virtually identical form, in a wide variety of organizations. We then address the question of why these stories have proliferated while others have not.

ORGANIZATIONAL STORIES; A VEHICLE FOR UNIQUENESS CLAIMS

Cultural manifestations such as stories and rituals serve as a vehicle for uniqueness claims. For example, Selznick (1957:151) observes that organizational stories " . . . are efforts to state, in the language of uplift and idealism, what is distinctive about the aims and methods of the enterprise." An organizational story focuses on a single, unified sequence of events, apparently drawn from the institution's history. The heroes and heroines of such stories are organizational members (Clark, 1970; Wilkins, 1979; Martin, 1982). The ways stories express institutional uniqueness become evident when examples are analyzed. IBM employees tell the story of a security supervisor who dared to challenge Thomas Watson, Jr., the intimidating Chairman of IBM's Board. The supervisor was:

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

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

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

"The men accompanying Watson were stricken; the moment held unpredictable possibilities. 'Don't you know who he is?' Someone hissed. Watson raised his hand for silence, while one of the party strode off and returned with the appropriate badge." (Rogers, 1969:153-4)

The explicit, details in this story communicate one aspect of uniqueness. Many of these details could be found only in this organizational context. Certainly there was only one Thomas Watson, Jr.,

and only one Lucille Burger. The white shirt dress code is a well-known distinguishing feature of the IBM corporate environment. Because these explicit details are one of a kind, or at least rare, they contribute to the story's claim to uniqueness.

Selznick (1957:151) observes that stories have implicit messages or morals, that in a successful organization, enable employees to complete the sentence: "What we are proud about around here is . . ." A message of the IBM rule breaking story for higher status employees is: "Even Watson obeys the rules, so you certainly should." For lower status people there is another moral: "Uphold the rules, no matter who is disobeying."

Through its morals the IBM rule breaking story implies that another type of organization is possible, one where bosses break rules with impunity and lower level employees do not dare to challenge the infraction. Morals implicitly communicate the distinctive values which make a given organization a special place to work. Through explicit details and implicit morals organizational stories serve as a vehicle for claims to uniqueness.

While the IBM story concerns the way this particular organization deals with status considerations in rule breaking, a story told by a plant supervisor at another company sounds very similar:

'I started on a plant tour with him (the president), having planned the route we would take through the plant. He, however, took me wherever he wanted to go--in this case, the production line. He leaned over one of the assembly line workers and asked her how things were going. She interrupted him abruptly and said firmly, 'I'm sorry, but you can't come in this area without your safety glasses.' He apologized, red with embarrassment, went back to get his safety glasses, and then came back and complimented her on her guts. They chatted for quite some time. He was very impressed that she

had challenged his behavior without being intimidated.' (paraphrased from Wilkins, 1979)

In fact, remarkably similar versions of this rule breaking story have been found in a variety of organizational contexts. In each version of this story, there are two starring characters. The first is a high status manager, always one of the highest ranking figures in the organization. The second character is a low status employee, who is either very young or a new employee. These attributes of the two protagonists amplify the status differences between them. The inequality in power sets up a tension: Will the high status person pull rank and be angry at the attempt to enforce the rules? In the versions of the rule breaking story presented above, rather than pulling rank, the "authority figure" complies with the rule. The outcome could, however be different, as shown in the following story.

Charles Revson, head of the Revlon Corporation, was worried that employees were not coming to work on time, although Charles himself seldom arrived much before noon. Therefore, as late as 1971:

"...everyone was required to sign in the morning. Everyone. Even Charles signed in. One day, when Revlon was in the process of moving from 666 Fifth Avenue up to the General Motors Building, in 1969, Charles sauntered in and began to look over the sign-in sheet. The receptionist, who was new, says 'I'm sorry, sir, you can't do that.' Charles says, 'Yes, I can.' 'No sir,' she says, 'I have strict orders that no one is to remove the list; you'll have to put it back.' This goes back and forth for a while with the receptionist being very courteous, as all Revlon receptionists are, and finally Charles says, 'Do you know who I am?' And she says, 'No, sir, I don't.' 'Well, when you pick up your final paycheck this afternoon, ask 'em to tell ya.'" (Tobias, 1976:98-99)

In each of these versions of the rule breaking story, four events occur in a fixed sequence. First, the high status person did something which drew attention to his/her authority. Second, the high status person broke a

company rule. Third, the subordinate challenged him/her, pointing out his/her infraction. Finally, the high status person either did or did not comply. The second and third versions of the story added a fifth, optional, event; the high status person reacted to the confrontation, by either complimenting or firing the subordinate.

COMMON ORGANIZATIONAL STORIES

The rule breaking story is the first of seven types of stories that we have found in a wide variety of public and private organizational contexts. We have systematically searched for organizational stories in the academic organizational literature and in published institutional histories. In addition, we have gathered organizational stories ourselves in a variety of settings, ranging from small electronic technology companies to a large federal agency. We have not attempted to count the frequency with which these seven story types do and do not occur since each of these sources of stories was compiled by different people for different reasons and none was designed to be a comprehensive listing of all stories told in a given setting. Thus, we cannot claim that the seven common story types we have found will necessarily occur in all organizational settings. We simply note that these seven common story types occur with great regularity in a wide variety of organizational contexts.

In order to discuss types of common stories we must have a way of defining whether a given story is or is not an exemplar of a common story type. To solve this problem, we have used script theory (Schank and Abelson, 1977) to develop content analysis categories (Martin, 1982). A

script is the skeleton of a story, once the non-essential details have been stripped away. Scripts specify a set of characters or roles and a causally-connected sequence of events, sometimes with optional branches for alternative story components and events. A content analysis scheme, based on script theory, can be used to assess whether a given story fits a common story type. Below the scriptal elements of a common story type are described, including key roles, a fixed sequence of events, and where relevant, optional branches. Two examples of each story type are given, to illustrate the variety of organizational contexts in which these common stories occur.

Is the Big Boss Human?

The central role in these stories is filled by a high status employee, often the president or founder of an organization. Three events occur. First, the status credentials of the central character are established, usually by citing a job title. Second, the character is presented with an opportunity to perform a status equalization act. Third, the central character does or does not abrogate his/her high status temporarily by exhibiting "human" qualities. For example, there is the story of the "Country Club Repairman:"

"Charles Brown was the chief executive officer at Illinois Bell during the late 1960's. A bad strike had crippled the organization, as craftspeople refused to work for several months. On the weekends, 'Charlie,' as he was known, would grab some tools, and start repairing telephones. One weekend, the country club where he belonged called with a complaint about a broken telephone. 'Without batting an eyelash,' or changing his clothes, Charlie went out and fixed the country club telephone. People reacted with glee and teasing: 'Believe me, he got some real ribbing for that.'" (Kleinfield, 1981:42)

Another example is told at CBS about Taylor, the man who was second in command to Paley, then Chairman of the Board of CBS. When Paley was out of town, as happened frequently given his fondness for southern France:

"...that guy Taylor struts around like a king. He'll walk into an elevator with a bunch of CBS executives and put his key in the pass switch and make them all ride up with him to the executive offices...because he doesn't want to wait." (Metz, 1975:401)

Can the little person rise to the top?

These stories concern the fit between an employee's abilities and his/her status in the organization. In one version of the story, the central role is filled by a low status employee who richly deserves promotion and is rewarded with a rapid rise through the hierarchy. This is the familiar Horatio Alger story. Proctor and Gamble's most famous version of this story is the legend of Richard Deupree.

"At the age of 12 Deupree had left school in Covington, Kentucky, to work as an insurance agency's office boy at \$1 a week. He did this out of economic necessity and moved on to a couple of other jobs before applying for work at P&G. Hired in 1905 as an office boy in P&G's Treasury Department at \$4.50 per week, he soon was promoted to a cashier's cage. It was there that he caught the attention of Thomas H. Beck, head of what was then P&G's newly organized Bulk Soap Sales Division. Beck was struck by Deupree's pleasant nature. 'You're the first cashier I've known who ever smiled when paying out money,' he said. Beck remembered the amiable young man in 1909 when his division needed another salesman." From this point on, Deupree's rise was rapid, as by 1917 Cooper Proctor had appointed the 32-year old Deupree to be P&G General Sales Manager. (Schisgall, 1981:77-79)

In other versions of this story a deserving low status employee remains unrewarded, an employee with high status is arbitrarily demoted, or an undeserving low status person is promoted. In some of these stories, it is unclear whether the presence or absence of reward is deserved. Consider, for instance, the story of Harry Johnson:

Harry was a mid-level bureaucrat with the imposing title of "Head of Administration and Budgeting" in the policy division of a large government agency. When new top management came in, a reorganization of the division occurred. When the dust settled, Harry was found at his new job - reading newsclippings and underlining parts of the paper which were relevant to the institution's business. (Feldman, in preparation)

Will I get fired?

These stories concern an organization faced with the possibility of firing or laying off employees. The stories have two protagonists: employee(s) who fear losing their jobs and (higher status) employee(s) who must make the decision. Often these roles are played by vaguely defined groups rather than specific individuals. Two events occur in these stories. First, a reason for the layoff or firing is given. Next, the company's decision is announced, sometimes with justifications for either the decision or its method of implementation. One of the most famous no-mass-layoffs stories is the "Nine-day Fortnight" story (Wilkins, in press).

One industry was particularly hard-hit by economic difficulties in the late 1970's. Most companies responded by laying off large number of employees. One company had a long-standing policy of avoiding layoffs whenever possible. In order to keep their promise of job security, everyone in the company, even the president, took a 10% cut in pay. In return for the cut, employees were required to work only nine of every ten days, hence the story title.

Sometimes mass layoffs are ordered, as in the "Fire Forty Today" story.

The central figure in this story was:

Walter Ronner started work on a Friday, and within three minutes of arriving received a call from Joseph Danilek, the comptroller of the company, who told him to lay off forty people 'today.' Ronner asked Danilek, 'How do we do this? 'Look, I've got orders from management to lay off forty people. I don't care how you do it, but get rid of them. By the way, we quit here at five-fifteen, so don't notify anybody until five o'clock. We want a full day's work out of them.'

"Ronner thought, 'Here I am, coming in as a new man, and the first thing I do is discharge forty people.' So Ronner said to Danilek, 'I refuse to do it.' Danilek was amazed and said, 'Do you mean what you say?' with some trepidation, Ronner answered, 'Yes.' After all, he and Danilek were on the same level of authority; Danilek was not his superior. 'If that's the case,' Danilek responded, 'I'll have to do it myself.'

"Forty people were picked at random, and at five o'clock Danilek lined them up on the stairs between the fifth and sixth floors--so the others wouldn't see--and he gave them a little lecture about lack of work and handed them their severance checks and let them go." (Tobias, 1976)

Will the organization help me when I have to move?

In these stories an organization repeatedly moves its employees from office to office or town to town. The central role is filled by the employee who faces repeated relocations. The personal difficulties associated with these moves are implied or fully elaborated, often with reference to the employee's family. In one of these stories the company helps alleviate these personal difficulties and the move ultimately benefits both the employee and the company. In other versions of this type of story, an alternative branch is taken: the organization does nothing to mitigate personal difficulties caused by the move and neither the institution nor the employee benefit from the dislocations.

One example of a moving story is:

"...the odyssey of the Henry Mai family. In the final days of the Vietnam war, Mai was one of 30 3M'ers who had plane tickets for his entire family. But there was no plane.

"Resourceful and persistent, Mai and his family took to an open boat and following one harrowing experience after another, finally succeeded in reaching Japan. There he was reunited with 3M and the company was able to expedite a transfer, first to Guam, then to California and finally to St. Paul.

"They arrived in St. Paul with nothing but the clothes on their backs,' said Arnie Dickson, office manager, International Operations. 'Two of the women from the office and I took the family shopping for clothes,

then lodged them temporarily in a local motel before getting them into a home.'

"The five children and Mrs. Mai were tutored in English through the 3M Language Society and the three older children entered the University of Minnesota. Mai himself was promoted to an Electrical Products marketing position." (Our Story So Far, 1977:130)

Another example of a moving story concerns:

Alenn James started out in one building, but was soon moved across the street to another building. His next move was to an office down the hall. He then moved four floors down. Finally, he was relocated in the exact same office that he had occupied when he first moved to this building. He had also recycled back to the same boss he had when he started working for the organization. The final irony was that he had continued to perform the same function in the organization throughout the entire time. (Feldman, in preparation)

How will the boss react to mistakes?

In this type of story, there are two character types: the mistake-maker and one or more superiors. These stories begin at the point when the superior(s) learn(s) that a mistake has been made. A confrontation ensues. In one version of the story the mistake maker is graciously forgiven (optionally with some atonement for the error and a warning that future mistakes will not be tolerated). In the other version, it is clear that mistakes are considered dangerous and mistake makers are not forgiven easily, if at all.

One such story concerns Whitcomb, a young manager:

"'I pulled a real boner,' he said, 'and figured I'd better get to March's office (Cecil C. March, then group vice president) and take my lumps.'

"'When I told him that I had made a mistake, he just looked at me for a minute and then he said, 'Just a minute... I approved your project and if there was a mistake, we made it together.'" (Our Story So Far, 1977:124)

In the other version of the story, a former employee of a large firm lost a deal to a competing firm:

The Chairman of his company was most unforgiving. After the initial blow-up, the Chairman continued to chew him out whenever the opportunity presented itself. At each monthly meeting, the Chairman would recall, in some subtle way, that lost deal. The Chairman was never critical if someone paid too much for a property, but he never forgave anyone for losing a deal. (Metz, 1975)

How will the organization deal with obstacles?

Of the seven common story types, the obstacle story occurs most frequently. Not surprisingly, there are many variations. Sometimes the obstacle is external to the organization--an environmental problem such as a fire, snow, a war, or a donkey in a telephone booth. Sometimes the obstacle is a technical or scientific problem, such as a photograph which fades. Finally, some obstacles are caused by the errors or inefficiencies of organizational employees or practices.

The frequency with which obstacle stories occur suggests that these stories may be particularly salient and important. Therefore, a detailed analysis of the content of obstacle stories may be worthwhile. The starring roles in these stories are filled by employees. There are apparently no restrictions on the status levels of these characters. They are confronted with organizational obstacle. They usually make some effort to overcome the obstacle. The stories end when the obstacle is overcome, or when it becomes clear to all concerned that it will never be overcome.

For example, AT&T employees tell the story of the "Miracle on 14th Street."

"A fire swept through a switching center in lower Manhattan. It was the worst single service disaster ever suffered by any single Bell operating company.

"Before firemen had given telephone repairmen the o.k. to enter the building, the Bell System had begun one of the typical crisis mobilizations of which it is so justly proud--indeed, the largest such mobilization ever. New York Telephone, AT&T long lines, Western Electric and Bell Labs contingents converged on the area. A crisis headquarters--inevitably called a war room--was established in a rented storefront on Fourteenth Street under the immediate direction of Lee Oberst, New York City area vice president of New York Telephone (Oberst, the type-cast hero for such an operation ... had started his Bell career in 1946 as a twenty eight dollar a week switchman.) Within 24 hours emergency telephone service had been restored to the medical, police, and fire facilities affected. Shortly thereafter the Bell task force for assessing damage and beginning to restore service had reached its peak strength of four thousand. They worked around the clock in 12 hour shifts of two thousand each. Except for a few stray problem lines, service was restored just before midnight on March 21--twenty two days after the disaster.(Kleinfield, 1981:307)

A very different tone is evident in the story of how employees of a government agency dealt with obstacles caused by an energy conservation policy:

Employees had reluctantly become used to walking down dimly lit corridors, washing their hands in cold water, and sweltering in the Washington heat without adequate air conditioning. Then a new president was elected and energy conservation was no longer top priority. The lights came on, the water became hot, and the air conditioning actually did its job. Oldtimers were not surprised by the change; they called it the 'New Administration Effect'. (Feldman, in preparation)

Positive and Negative Versions of Each Story Type

To this point, the discussion of each story type has emphasized the scriptal elements common to all exemplars of the type, mentioning optional branches only in passing. For each story type, however, two very different examples have been presented. In spite of having similar scriptal elements, the tone of the two versions of each story has been quite dissimilar. It may be useful to acknowledge and explore these differences. For lack of a

better label, we will refer to the two versions of each story type as positive or negative.

Obstacle stories are a good arena for exploring this issue because the difference between the positive and negative versions of this type of story is so striking. The heroes and heroines of the positive versions respond to an obstacle with effort beyond that required by their formal job descriptions. These stories portray employees working with unusual diligence and persistence, supplemented with an extraordinary activity requiring physical effort, ingenuity and/or courage. For example, insurance agents buy snowshoes and hike through blizzards to reach their clients (Carr, 1975), a brilliant scientist slaves day and night to solve an intractable problem (Olshaker, 1978), and a team of employees overcomes incredible odds to find the source of an elusive quality control problem (Tobias, 1976).

Perhaps as a result of these extraordinary efforts, in the positive obstacle stories employees apparently exert considerable control over events. For example, in the "Miracle on 14th Street" employees competently repaired the extensive damage caused by a major fire, restoring the system to working order within a remarkably brief period of time. In some obstacle stories, the obstacle is caused by people within the organization, rather than external forces, such as environmental disasters or technical difficulties. For example, there was a careless workman at Procter and Gamble who left the soap-mixing machine unattended and created Ivory--the soap that floated because of the extra air whipped into the mixture (Schisgall, 1981). In this story, the obstacle is transformed into a

stupendous success, as astute employees realize the marketability of the new soap. The outcomes of positive obstacle stories are clear cut; the obstacles are overcome, at best bringing unanticipated success to the institution and at worst achieving a return to the status quo.

In negative obstacle stories the same range of obstacles is present: environmental, technical, and internal to the organization. The starring characters, however, are often not even mentioned by name. They respond to the obstacle with activities that fall within their normal job descriptions. The self-starting individualism, the hallmark of the positive obstacle stories, is absent in the negative versions, where the characters adhere to standard operating procedures or react with resignation, and/or passivity.

For example, in one large bureaucracy an individual received a form requesting that a copy of a report be mailed. He completed the simple task, unlike the five employees before him, who each had received the form and delegated the task to someone else rather than do it themselves (Feldman, in preparation). In this case the hero successfully overcomes an obstacle by simply doing his job, while other organizational employees are portrayed as poor performers.

In the "New Administration Effect" the obstacle is also successfully removed, but the success (lighted hallways and hot water) is due to forces outside the organization. As in the report mailing story, the majority of the organization's employees do not appear to be capable of exerting control over the obstacles in these negative stories.

The outcomes in these stories are problematic. Even if an obstacle is successfully overcome, the organization often cannot take credit. What is a success for an individual employee may be a failure from an organizational point of view.

To summarize, seven types of common stories have been described. The stories deal with seven concerns that people in organizations have. Exemplars of the story types share a set of scriptal elements, but the organizational settings, in which these stories take place, clearly vary. In general, there are two categories of organizational settings. In the positive versions of the stories, the top people in the institution are admirable, yet approachable; superiors are competent and deserve their status; the organization cares about its people and their personal well-being; disruptions, such as firing and moving, are kept to a minimum; mistakes are forgiven and obstacles clearly overcome. In the organizations portrayed in the negative versions of these seven stories, the top people are neither admirable nor approachable; status and competence are not matched; the organization shows little signs of caring about its people and their personal well-being; disruptions are neither minimized nor particularly justifiable; mistakes are not forgiven; and obstacles are problematic and difficult for the organization to overcome.

We will return to these differences between the positive and negative versions, but first it may be informative to note the limits of these common story types. Some of the types occurred more often than others. Stories about the human qualities of the boss and about environmental obstacles were most plentiful. As you might expect, some types were more frequent in

certain kinds of organizations. For example, companies stressing research and development activities had more stories about technical obstacles, while organizations which require frequent relocations had more moving stories. Finally, not all stories are common stories. For example, a story about the heads of two rival agencies sleeping together did not fit any of the common story types. Obviously, some organizational stories are unique to one or a few settings. In addition, there undoubtedly exist common story types that are not yet in our typology. The seven common story types described above are only a beginning.

WHY COMMON STORIES?

Although it is inherently interesting to examine the content of stories which arise in a variety of organizations, it is perhaps more interesting to ask why these stories have proliferated while others have not. The first of the three explanations we will offer concerns dualities.

Dualities

In this section we argue that the common stories express tensions that arise from a conflict between organizational exigencies and the values of individual employees (which are in turn reflective of the values of the larger society). For example employees may value equality, security, and control, while organizations may demand the right to threaten these values in order to survive.

We refer to these particular sources of tension as dualities. A duality is an issue which cannot be easily resolved, because contradictory aspects of the issue are inevitably present and simultaneously desirable and undesirable. Dualities cause tension, at least in Western industrialized settings, because there is a desire to believe that a resolution exists, if only it could be found. Organizational stories, then, express tension created by dualities (perhaps reducing that tension by expressing it).

This argument is consistent with anthropological analysis of myths as expressive of tensions. Myths bridge conflicting principles, either by appearing to offer a reconciliation (e.g., Cohen, 1969;) or by holding irreconcilable alternatives in suspension (e.g., Malinowski, 1962; Levi-Strauss, 1979; Yanow, 1982). The common organizational stories either offer a clear cut resolution to a duality or they express discomfort at the difficulty of doing so. The nature of dualities becomes clearer when they are related specifically to the concerns expressed in the common stories.

Equality vs. Inequality

Three of the common story types (i.e., What do I do when a higher status person breaks a rule? Is the big boss human? Can the little person rise to the top?) are related to concerns about status inequality. In a society in which equality is a basic value, the hierarchical nature of many organizations forces a sometimes discomfoting confrontation with inequality. These stories express that discomfort and present situations in which equality among people could emerge. Everyone should have to obey the rules; everyone is human; anyone should be able to rise to the top if he or

she is sufficiently competent and hardworking. In the positive versions of these stories these equalities do emerge. In the negative versions they could emerge, and their failure to do so reinforces the inequality.

Security vs. Insecurity

Three of the concerns (i.e., Will I get fired? Will the company help me if I have to move? How will the boss react to mistakes?) express the insecurity created by being in a situation in which actions of an individual (the boss) or the organization can substantially alter one's entire life. Obtaining and retaining financial and emotional security is central to most people's self-image and the structure of their lives. Yet most organizations must retain the right to threaten the security of their employees if survival of the organization is in question.

These stories acknowledge both sides of the duality, noting the preference of the organization and the individuals whose job is threatened. The positive versions seem to predict that the individuals' preferences will be honored, while the negative versions give priority to the organizational imperative. Thus, these stories can be summarized as predictions. If this organization gets into trouble, you can expect it to fire you/not fire you. If this organization requires you to move, you can expect that it will help you/not help you and that the move will/will not have beneficial effects. If you make a mistake in this organization, you can expect to be forgiven/not to be forgiven.

Control vs. Lack of Control

The obstacle stories deal with a duality created by the desire to control and the events which indicate our inability to do so. Control, or the illusion of control, is a major theme in individual and organizational life (e.g., Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Indeed, organizations are often founded in order to control that which is beyond the control of a single individual (March and Simon, 1958). However, organizations inevitably have to confront environmental, technical, and internal obstacles. In a society where there is a strong belief that one can and should control one's own fate, such potentially uncontrollable obstacles can be discomfoting. The positive versions of these stories reassure listeners that unforeseen events can be controlled while the negative versions express the difficulties posed by a lack of control.

In summary, the common story types acknowledge both sides of a duality. For example, stories describing a status equalization act simultaneously acknowledge the usual existence of status differentials. Thus, the common organizational stories may be seen as both a description of the world as it exists (with its discomfoting dualities) and, for most of the stories, a statement about how this organization alleviates or accentuates the tension created by the duality. Because these dualities (summarized in Figure 1) are not easily reconcilable, the common organizational stories may serve as a pressure valve, releasing tension which could not otherwise be dissipated, except by abolishing some of the basic attributes of most organizations, such as inequalities in power, the capacity to survive, and the desire to control outcomes.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Organizational Stories as Self-serving Rationalizations of the Past

In addition to expressing dualities, the common story types offer a self-enhancing explanation for organizational events. People and organizations often seek retrospective explanations (e.g., Weick, 1979; Staw, 1980). This is not merely a dispassionate inquiry. Reputations and self esteem are on the line. Not surprisingly then, there is considerable evidence of a self-enhancing bias. Individuals often attribute causality for success to themselves personally, while blaming failure on external forces beyond their control (c.f., Weiner et al., 1971; Miller and Ross, 1975; Bradley, 1978).

These individual level results have recently been extended to the organizational level of analysis. For example, an analysis of annual reports to stockholders revealed that corporations offered self-serving explanations for financial performance levels, crediting a profitable year to management's skills or blaming poor performance on a poorer economy (Bettman and Weitz, 1982; Staw, McKechnie, and Puffer, 1982). Douglas (1982) argues that by taking credit for success and exonerating itself from blame for misfortune, an organization can maximize commitment and control the spread of alarm and recrimination.

There are several problems, however, with a straightforward extension of attribution theory to the organizational level of analysis. Two of these problems are germane to the next argument we present. First, when organizations are involved, as in the Mei Lai massacre, a distinction between causality and responsibility must be drawn (Kelman and Lawrence, 1972; Pallak and Davies, 1982). In this paper we focus solely on responsibility.

The second problem concerns the distinction, drawn by attribution theorists, between internal factors, controlled by the individual, and external factors, beyond the individual's control. One reason people organize, as noted above, is to extend the realm over which they believe they have control. Therefore, organizational stories distinguish three, not two, levels of control: the individual employees who are the hero/ines of the stories; other factors, such as employees, from within the organization; and factors external to the organization, such as the environment or other institutions. For brevity, these levels are labeled individual, internal to the organization, and external to the organizational.

This three-way classification can be used to analyze the positive and negative versions of the obstacle stories. In the positive versions of the obstacle stories, individual employees and the organization as a whole are portrayed as being responsible for successes. Failures are rare, and when they occur, individual employees, with the help of the organization, usually manage to rectify the damage. If failure does occur, it is blamed on environmental forces.

Figure 2 summarizes the pattern of attributions in the positive obstacle stories. The individual hero/ine(s) and factors internal to the organization tend to have the same self-serving pattern of attribution: responsible for success but not for failure. Factors external to the organization have the opposite pattern of attribution: responsible for failure, but seldom able to take credit for success.

Insert Figure 2 here

The pattern of attribution in the negative obstacle stories, however, is quite different than in the positive versions. When success occurs, it is credited to individual employees, who triumph over the incompetence of the rest of the organization, and/or to benevolent forces in the environment, as in the story of the "New Administration Effect." When failures occur in negative obstacle stories. Individual employees and environmental forces are exonerated from blame, while the organization is cast as the guilty party.

Figure 3 uses the three level classification to summarize this pattern of attribution. Individuals display the familiar self-serving pattern of attributing success but not failure to themselves. Note, however, that this

pattern is extended, not to the organization as it was in the positive stories, but to the external environment.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Identification and Distancing

The significance of these patterns of attribution in the positive and negative versions of the obstacle stories becomes evident when it is placed in the broader center of identification with the organization. In the positive versions, the starring employees, have the same desirable control over outcomes as the rest of the organization--a control which is not characteristic of forces in the environment, such as other organizations. The message of these positive story types can be characterized as: "My organization and most, if not all, of its employees are good/sane/just/competent. To the extent difficulties are not surmounted, this is the fault of forces outside our control."

The pattern of attribution in the negative versions of the common stories shows employees distancing themselves from, rather than identifying with, the organization. The message of these negative story types can be characterized as: "Some employees in my organization, with whom I identify, are good/sane/just/competent. My organization however is bad/insane/unjust/incompetent. To the extent that successes occur, they happen because of the

efforts of these admirable employees, because of assistance from forces outside of the organization, and despite the actions of the rest of the organization. When failures occur, the organization itself is to blame."

It seems curious that in the negative versions the pattern of attribution for factors external to the environment is like that for the employees who star in the stories. Why were the starring employees not given sole responsibility for success, with the less desirable pattern of attribution given to both the organization and factors external to the organization?

AN EXPLANATION FOR THE UNIQUENESS PARADOX

An answer may lie in the paradox with which this paper began--that the common stories implicitly and explicitly make the point that the organization is unique. Positive versions of the common stories portray the starring employees and the organization as uniquely good, a sanctuary in an otherwise difficult world.

The negative versions also endow the organization with a special distinction. Rather than being the best of all possible organizations, however, it becomes the worst. The organization is uniquely bad, uniquely unworthy of its employees. Given the perception of the organization as a bad place to be, redemption is possible only through escape or, if exit is not possible, at least the thought that life outside the organization is better. Hope and the wish to associate oneself with what is desirable may account for the positive portrayal of factors external to the organization.

Even if a person belongs to a uniquely bad organization, work--even hard work, can make sense if it establishes a connection with good which exists elsewhere.

In summary, we have offered three reasons why the common story types may have proliferated, while other stories have not survived or multiplied. First, the common stories express discomfort with dualities caused by conflicts between organizational exigencies and individual values. Second, they offer self-enhancing attributions for organizational successes and failures. Finally, these attributions endow the institution with uniqueness, enabling employees to identify with a benevolent organization or to distance themselves from a less desirable institution.

The stories that contain this message of institutional uniqueness are not themselves unique to a particular organizational setting. This uniqueness paradox may have implications beyond the realm of organizational stories. Underlying the surface manifestations of an organization's culture, such as stories, lie deeply-held assumptions about organizational life (Schein, 1981; Schein, 1982). It is difficult for most people to abandon the assumptions that decision-making processes are rational (c.f., March and Simon, 1958) and that events are under one's personal control (c.f., Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). It may be that, in organizational cultures, the claim to institutional uniqueness is as fundamental as assumptions about rationality and internal control. In our society these assumptions are comforting. It is possible, however, to imagine societies where they would not be. .

Figure 1: Dualities underlying Common Concerns in Organizational Stories

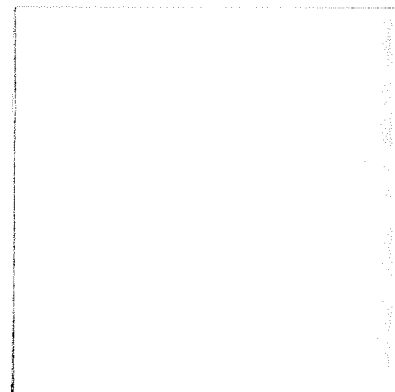
<u>Dualities</u>	<u>Concerns</u>
Equality vs. Inequality	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What do I do when a higher status person breaks a rule?- Is the big boss human?- Can the little person rise to the top?
Security vs. Insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Will I be fired?- Will the organization help me if I have to move?- How will the boss react to mistakes?
Control vs. Lack of Control	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- How will the organization deal with obstacles?

Figure 2: Attributions of Responsibility in Positive Versions of Common Organizational Stories

	<u>Success</u>	<u>Failure</u>
<u>Internal:</u> Individual	High responsibility	Low responsibility
<u>External:</u> Intra-organizational	High responsibility	Low responsibility
<u>External:</u> Extra-organizational	Low responsibility	High responsibility

Figure 3: Attributions of Responsibility in
Negative Versions of Common Organizational Stories

	<u>Success</u>	<u>Failure</u>
<u>Internal:</u> Individual	High responsibility	Low responsibility
<u>External:</u> Intra-organizational	Low responsibility	High responsibility
<u>External:</u> Extra-organizational	High responsibility	Low responsibility



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