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# Anecdotal evidence: understanding organizational reality through organizational humorous tales

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# Anecdotal evidence: understanding organizational reality through organizational humorous tales

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**Abstract:** In the paper, we propose a new focus in qualitative organization studies, which we call organizational anecdotal evidence. The novelty of our method is in linking storytelling, studies of organizational anecdotes, and humor studies. We claim that organizational anecdotes, jokes, and short fictional stories should become a core object of organizational culture analysis, rather than be refuted as unimportant. This is so because the study of organizational anecdotes and fictional stories shared by the social actors is more meaningful and gives more insight into their culture than establishing mere facts. In the article, we briefly relate the limitations of factual studies in many areas of organizational research, describe the theoretical background of our method (coming from humor studies, storytelling, and organizational anecdotes analysis), and propose their combination as a new approach for organization scholars, namely, organizational anecdotal evidence research. The utility of the proposed methodological approach is demonstrated based on original research conducted in a public administration organization.

**Keywords:** anecdotes, humor, narratives, storytelling, organizational culture, myths

## 1 Introduction

Many authors (Corvellec 1996; Czarniawska-Joerges 1998; Czarniawska-Joerges 1999; Phillips 1995), based on the widely accepted sense-made nature of organizational life (Weick 1969/1979), have convincingly shown that studies of fiction can be usefully incorporated into organizational research, including

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research of orally shared stories (Boje 2001b; Boje 2008; Dailey and Browning 2014; Waymer and Logan 2016).

We propose to go a step further and make a case for studying the storytelling of anecdotes to understand organizational culture and provide evidence that is more solid than the studies of accidental “true” facts. Traditionally, researchers are encouraged to weed out gossip, hearsay, and organizational anecdotes from their findings. According to our view, “what really happened” is often incidental, while the stories that prevail carry true, or truer, meanings. Just like myths, they can be “‘true’ from the point of view of human experience and consciousness and ‘untrue’ from the point of view of empirical history all at the same time” (Kostera 2008, p. 3).

The novelty of our method is in linking storytelling, organizational culture, and humor studies. These approaches are growing in recognition in organization studies (Cann et al. 2014; Case and Gaggiotti 2016; Schaefer 2013; Westwood and Johnston 2013), but neither their combination nor their leading role in organizational culture has been consistently proposed. Similarly, while many publications have focused on organizational humor (Cooper 2005; Kahn 1989; Romero and Pescosolido 2008), the topic itself has not been approached as the primary and arguably most important emanation of organizational culture. Even though studies of humor have been conducted, it is still treated as a fringe phenomenon rather than one of the most important interpretive keys to understanding organizational actors.

It may be useful, though, to offer a single approach, justifying the studies of organizational anecdotes as emanations of culture through storytelling analysis. This should prove particularly useful for anthropological analysis of workplace culture from the perspective of workers themselves and without the veneer of managerial propaganda.

In this article, we (1) emphasize the limitations of factual studies in many organizational research areas and describe the theoretical background of our method, stemming from humor studies and storytelling; (2) propose their combination as a new tool for organization research, namely, organizational anecdotal evidence research; and (3) present this new approach using the example of our own research work. Finally (4), we discuss limitations and offer conclusions.

## 2 Importance of narrative and storytelling studies

Currently, factual research dominates organization studies. By factual, we mean studies that aim to discover what really happens in the sense of historical and

physical accuracy. However, in many areas of organizational studies rooted in anthropology and cultural studies, attention is also paid to the ways in which organizational actors construct their shared reality through communication (Gabriel 1995; Schultz et al. 2013). This approach has a much wider scope and aim to explain reasons, beliefs, and actors' logic, as well as such fragile and elusive concepts as, for instance, organizational memory (Akgün et al. 2012). This is especially important when one is interested in investigating culture in organizations (Alvesson 2012). To deepen our understanding of organizational actors' perception of reality—and thus, learn about organizational culture—we need, in some cases, to break with the pretense of factuality (Gabriel 2004b). According to this perspective, what happens in organizations “in fact” is often just a random, incidental result of meaningless actions, and merely a contingent consequence of different trends. On the other hand, what happens in organizations in fiction (in fictional stories shared by organizational actors) is the essence of what people believe in and reflects the organizational world much more as it “truly” is, rather than physically correct observations. Therefore, studies of narratives and stories, including fictional ones, should have a place in organization studies.<sup>1</sup>

Currently, there are two main schools of thought regarding the approach to narratives in organization studies: a narratologist perspective, incorporating also written accounts (including literary fiction), spearheaded by Czarniawska (Czarniawska 1997; Czarniawska 2004); and an ethnomethodological approach, focusing on the conversational aspects of organizational storytelling, as proposed by Boje or Gabriel (Boje 2001b; Boje 2008; Gabriel 1995; Gabriel 2000; Gabriel 2004a) and arguing that the very essence of interactions and negotiating social constructs relies on creating coherent stories. In our view, both are important, and they meet well in the studies of organizational humor; in particular they mostly rely on oral stories, while having fictional elements.

Clearly, analyzing fiction may be useful in better understanding management and organizations, since it helps in combining the traditional academic rational accounts with the more subjective and emotional study of characters

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<sup>1</sup> The usefulness of storytelling studies of organizational life derives from the observation that sharing stories is a natural way of organizing human experience, just as exchanging narratives is the most common form of social interaction (Bruner 1991). In fact, the very process of the social construction of reality (Berger and Luckman 1967) is fundamentally discursive (Phillips et al. 2004). As some authors point out, collective storytelling is actually a useful metaphor for organizing (Boje 1994); in such, the very essence of interactions and negotiating social constructs relies on creating coherent, plausible stories. Organizations abound in “narratives with simple but resonant plots and characters, involving narrative skill, entailing risk, and aiming to entertain, persuade, and win over” (Gabriel 2000, p. 22).

and the roles imposed on them (Czarniawska-Joerges and Guillet De Monthoux 1994). Analyzing powerful narratives may, for instance, help in shedding new light of the issues of identity, power relations, and inequality in management studies (Knights and Willmott 1999). This is true not only of literary classics, but also of popular culture and cartoons (Hjorth 2005; Rhodes 2001).<sup>2</sup> However, the enforcement of organizational propaganda and stories unavoidably leads to countercultural movements (Martin and Siehl 1983). Organizational actors react with their own stories and narratives to oppose the dominant discourse. Jokes, stories and gossip, where “emotions prevail over rationality and pleasure over reality,” offer the third possibility beyond conformity and rebellion (Gabriel 1995 p. 477), sustaining the functioning of the organization. These stories are perhaps an even more important element of organizing since they are unmanageable, deeply hidden for an external observer, and often perceived by organizational actors as closer to reality than the official discourse. In fact, humorous stories have a major role in cultural shaping, since they lead to a feeling of pleasure that also comes “not from creating it, but from sharing it” (Weick and Westley 1999). Thus, investigating them is of utmost importance for organization studies. One of the most interesting elements of anti-managerial storytelling is organizational humor (Hatch 1997; Hatch and Ehrlich 1993). Humorous discourse allows for a contradiction-centered construction of organizational culture.

### 3 Humor studies

The analysis of playful behaviors at work (Hunter et al. 2010) and organizational humor (Romero and Pescosolido 2008) is useful for organization studies because it allows a special kind of insight into organizational culture. This is so, because “humor appears when people resolve two conflicting images in ways that make sense within distorted systems of logic. The processes by which organization members set up such puzzles for others to

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<sup>2</sup> Similarly, analyzing local organizational stories, common to organizational actors, is of utmost importance for management and organizational science. Through these stories, shared meanings and values are negotiated (Smircich 1983). It is the process of enacting narratives, and constantly re-mythologizing the main storylines, that constitutes organizing (Boyce 1996). In fact, management itself relies on creating powerful narratives. In the case of authoritarian and “greedy” institutions (Coser 1974), this leads to monophony of stories imposed on organizational actors (Boje 1995): The management of narratives and conscious storytelling are important elements of normative control (Kunda 1992).

solve [...] say much about the ways organization members work and play together” (Kahn 1989, p. 46). There are a number of classical theories explaining the nature and social functions of humor, dating back to Aristotle (Perks 2012), which proved to be useful for organizational studies (Morreall 1983; Morreall 1991). Mainly, comic relief theory, when laughing helps to relief tension (Westwood 2004); superiority theory, stressing that one laughs at people to feel better than them (Duncan and Feisal 1989); and incongruity theory, pointing out the inconsistency between what one expects or knows and what really happens as a source of comicality (Yarwood 1995). In our approach, inspired by narrative and storytelling studies, we focus on the carnival aspects of organizational culture.

Humor stories in organizations, like traditional carnivals, can serve as a realm of temporal liberation from the dominant discourse and established formal hierarchies. These kinds of organizational stories and behaviors are carnivalesque in the sense described by Bakhtin (1984). Bakhtin’s foundational study of medieval carnivals shows vividly the important role of non-official playful behavior in maintaining social reality through temporary relief from dominant norms and offering suppressed people a means to talk back to power. In his own words, “As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (1984, p. 10).

Bakhtin explored carnival as a moment where the plurality of independent voices and genuine polyphony emerges. These anti-authoritarian dimensions of carnival have been emphasized in postmodern perspectives of organizational life. Boje, Luhman and Cunliffe (2003, p. 7) indicated that “the field of organization studies uses ‘theatre’ as a metaphor for organization life in two distinctive ways: first, ‘organizing-is-like-theatre’; and second, ‘organizing-is-theatre.’” The authors underlined that everyone can participate in the carnival, and by using the language of irony, criticize power structures. For Bakhtin, a polyphony of a dialogue between two or more people is a prerequisite for knowledge and understanding (Jabri 2005). The construction of meaning is discursive: as Bakhtin describes it (1986, p. 87), the “meaning” itself is not static, but rather unfinished, generative and iterating process. The open-endedness of the creation of meaning is particularly striking in humorous utterances. Humorous tales heavily rely on ambiguity, incongruity, and uncertainty (Forabosco 1992) (Landreville 2015). Especially, organizational anecdotes draw on the ongoing construction of meaning, as well as a mutual recognition of the lack or absurdity of the social order.

Organizational humor is often depicted as a tool of power struggle between workers and management (Fleming and Spicer 2007). It is referred to as a “relationship lubricant” (Mao et al. 2017), a key ingredient in the “social glue” that the organizational culture provides (Cooper 2005). Many totalitarian organizations and states recognize jokes and humor as a serious threat (Oring 2004). This is true for several reasons: Irony serves as a tool for deconstructing and defusing the official organizational propaganda, and it helps people distance themselves from their roles (Kunda 1992). It also plays an important part in a collective construction of workplace identities (Schaefer 2013).

In fact, the larger the power imbalance between people and the organization, the more humor is used as a weapon of the weak: Examples go far beyond internal organizational power plays or counter-totalitarian opposition (Benton 1988) and include, for example, customer-corporation relations (observable e.g. in the prominence of jokes about Microsoft, see: Shifman and Blondheim 2010) or anti-racism movements (Weaver 2010).

Everyday humor helps in making sense of the professional roles of workers and in resisting managerial control (Lynch 2009). In a way, organizational rhetoric, used to reinforce the expected behaviors and hierarchical authority, is challenged by deconstructing ambivalence of spontaneous worker opposition (Höpfl 1995a), also in humoristic form. Using the polyphonic approach of Bakhtin to analyze workplace stories, as proposed by Boje (Boje 2014), makes perfect sense for organizational anecdotes in that it allows to zero in on the carnivalesque spectacle, playing a major role in organizational resistance (Boje 2001a), while refocusing on the spontaneous enactment of polyphony by the organizational actors, rather than on the humor and grotesque aspects of organizational propaganda (Boje et al. 2005). As such, it complements the organizational culture analysis by its performative view (Latour 1986), from the perspective of the participants.

All this makes workplace humor, as well as organizational anecdotes, a natural target for studies attempting to understand organizational culture and management, through the perspective not only of managers, but also of workers. Workplace anecdotes are perhaps the most interesting, and the most underestimated, genre of organizational narratives.

Thus, in these stories, important comments on organizational life are hidden; messages encrypted in jokes convey information that is not controlled by the formal hierarchy and may inform about future trends and probable developments. Hence, organizational humor is of special relevance for those whose research topics concern organizational change, innovations, and creativity (Lang and Lee 2010).

Acknowledging its potentially subversive role, we also note that humor can be used by those in power to discipline subordinates, reinforce the stereotypes

and increase domination of the more powerful groups (Thomae and Pina 2015). Still, also in this form, it reveals the aspects of organizational culture, which would remain hidden if the organizational humor is overlooked. Thus, we argue that by using traditional research instruments that focus on observing real behaviors, looking for true stories and validating them, researchers cannot access important parts of organizational reality.

## 4 New methodology: organizational anecdotal evidence

As we demonstrated in the previous parts of the article, well-established methodological trends in organization theory have dealt with phenomena like storytelling, narrations, and humor. Studies of these trends acknowledge the usefulness and insightfulness of fiction in research on organizational life and have shifted their focus from the “facts” to the fiction. Fictional stories and narratives play a major role in enactment of organizing and carry meanings deeply shared by organizational actors. Anecdotes and humorous accounts constitute an extremely important category of these narratives because they are manifestations of contention, counter-mainstream rhetoric, and power plays. Also, they clearly offer an interesting and meaningful way to look at organizational cultures.

Specific studies of fiction in organization theory are located along a continuum between humanistic tradition and performance studies. At one end of the continuum, anecdotes are seen as texts that are subject to interpretation. Researchers can trace tropes like metaphor, metonymy, metalepsis, synecdoche, and irony (White 1973) and, as a result, may be interested in finding archetypes (Jemielniak and Kostera 2010; Kostera 2007; Kostera 2008). Typically, in this approach, the broader social context and actual practices are less emphasized than the form. Closer to the center of the continuum, we would place the symbolic-interpretive perspective that acknowledges the broader context and social interaction, although the phenomena under study are seen through the lenses of meaning making and textualization (Alvesson 1993; Geertz 1973; Geertz 1983). The other end of the continuum is occupied by those who question the “earlier generation’s ethnographic textualism that produced books with titles such as *Writing Culture*” (Denzin 2003, p. 16). It is not the content that matters, but rather the performance (Butler 1990; Conquergood 1992): the way a story is told, to whom, its connection to previous versions of the story, and social consequences of performance (Bauman



1975). According to this perspective, the story, gossip, or joke does not matter; what matters is the practice of storytelling, gossiping, and joking. Fictional stories are seen as phenomena that change social reality rather than communicating certain messages (Austin 1962; Schieffelin 1998). Stories are not texts but always performances; even a novel is performed in the act of reading. Studies situated differently along this continuum address different research questions and apply diverse research tools.

We position the organizational anecdotal evidence method in the tradition of “blurred genres” that cross traditional disciplinary boundaries (Geertz 1983, pp. 19–35). It stands at the intersection of the humanities and social sciences. Empirical material is treated hermeneutically and it has validity, even without direct reference to social life. At the same time, the methodology is strongly anchored in the social sciences and in a methodological tradition that values firsthand data collection, a broader social context, and social practices.

We recognize that the relationship between the social sciences and fiction has existed since the beginnings of sociology (Czarniawska 2014), and anthropology still has deep connections to literature (De Angelis 2003). Literature may often precede the social sciences in describing important changes and phenomena (Czarniawska 2017). Studies of fictional stories clearly allow for a deeper understanding of complex, culture-embedded issues. At the same time, we understand that most organizational culture is discursive (Grant et al. 1998) and transmitted orally. Thus, drawing from organizational storytelling (Boje 2014) but consciously focusing on the fictional stories makes perfect sense (Gabriel 2000; Gabriel 2004a), and is especially useful when combined with humor studies.

The proposed method, developed to make use of these insights, is grounded in a sense that is somewhat different than grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967): mainly through seeking common patterns and iterations of ironic storylines and anecdotes. The method relies on analyzing two types of organizational anecdotes: those collected through non-participant or participant observation; and those collected by asking organizational actors to tell their anecdotes, specifically for the purpose of the research. Since the narrative collection methods and narrative studies approaches in general have been discussed abundantly in the literature (Buchanan 2004; Czarniawska 1997; Rhodes and Brown 2005), as has the collection of stories (Boje 2014; Clandinin 2006), we are not going to describe the process here. In our research, we relied on collecting data by asking organizational actors to tell their anecdotes. The rationale behind this choice was to grasp the performative act of the intentional re-telling of an anecdote.

## 5 The case for organizational anecdotal evidence

To test and demonstrate the potential benefits of the developed method, we conducted a research project in a public administration institution working on issues of high public concern. We chose a public institution because such institutions are often perceived as authoritarian, relying on top-down communication rules and procedures, as well as oriented toward obeying orders rather than supporting individual initiative (Claver et al. 1999). Public institutions rarely use non-standard and non-official codes and narrations to warm their rigid image, and rarely confront satirized visions of themselves. In contrast, due to the rise of social media and open channels of communication, many companies have been forced to adopt leaner approaches to critiques and mocking (incorporating humor into the official propaganda may also be a strategy of taking control over discourse and new forms of normative control: Fleming and Sturdy 2011). Even though evolution of the new public management movement has increased pressure on state bureaucracies struggling in an ultra-dynamic marketplace to become generally more responsive, they still tend to favor the easy chair of the customer over the sweat and turmoil of open, more participatory involvement (Vigoda 2003).

With such a rigid image among employees and those outside the organizations, public institutions are vulnerable to narratives that ridicule them (Höpfl 1995b). Because of their rigidity, public institutions are quite frequently externally portrayed as “stiff” and lacking humor; and internally ridiculed by employees who, through mockery, express their complex relationship with their workplace.

The study, aiming to cover this complex relationship between employees and their organization, was conducted in a public institution by one of the authors at his/her former workplace. This setting created an environment of mutual trust and understanding, which significantly influenced the process of obtaining anecdotes. To gather the stories, the researcher requested former colleagues to tell him/her funny and memorable anecdotes about their daily routines at the office.

The researcher conducted a group interview in a corridor of the office space. Research participants were asked to tell stories that are considered anecdotal within their community. The mode of interviewing was unstructured, dynamic, and very open, as it would be extremely difficult to evoke spontaneous humorous stories in a framework of highly structured interactions. The interview was designed to avoid colliding with work routines but rather to resemble them: The interview recalled typical corridor chatting and gossiping. Any interviewee could

join or leave the group interview at any time and all stories were told in public, many of them initiated by one of the employees and finished by another. The researcher asked the interviewees for permission to record the conversation and assured them that the stories would be analyzed and presented anonymously. Moreover, the researcher attempted not to disturb the “natural flow” of stories and not to intervene in the way the stories were told or how they were connected to one another. Thanks to this strategy, the retained performative aspect of the storytelling enriched the interpretation of the role of anecdotes and humor in the everyday routines of this particular organization.

Research participants were free to decide how many stories they wanted to share. Eleven employees responded with several anecdotes and three declined to participate. The group of interviewees consisted of 11 people (7 men and 4 women) with an average age of 33.5 years. Most of them were employed full time in senior positions and all of them were highly educated with degrees in law, social sciences, or public administration. Their average work experience at the institution was 4.5 years.

As the performative dimension of fictional stories shared by organizational actors is important in our analytical approach, we decided to present anecdotes as close to verbatim as possible and to present extended quotations. It is easy to observe that the language used by our interviewees is highly colloquial (e.g., many phrases contain slang expressions). This may be connected to the average age of our respondents, but it may also be interpreted in a different way. Slang consists of a lexicon of non-standard words and phrases, and the use of these words and phrases is typically associated with the subversion of a standard variety and likely to be interpreted by listeners as implying particular attitudes on the part of the speaker (Burke 1998). In some contexts, however, a speaker’s selection of slang words or phrases may convey prestige, indicating group membership or distinguishing group members from those who are not part of the group (Klerk 1991). Here, we can say that our interviewees wanted to distinguish themselves from the rest of public administration staff by using language that is generally not tolerated in that setting.

## 6 Results: reversed anecdotes

Thirty anecdotes were collected during the interview. After transcribing and translating the humorous stories shared by research participants, we conducted analysis focused on repeating axes of narration. We applied an inductive approach to code the collected stories using Computer Assisted Qualitative

Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS). At the next step, we sorted descriptive codes into the categories analyzed in detail below (one story may belong to more than one category):

- (1) Stories of routine events/duties focused on playful aspects (10)
- (2) Stories of one-time, exceptional events (3)
- (3) Stories of professional training (6)
- (4) Stories of internal politics and power relations in the organization (6)
- (5) Stories of contact with outsiders who had false expectations regarding the organization (8)

The proposed categories are not exclusive and are built based on different aspects of the anecdotes (their routines/uniqueness and their main theme); however, we believe that through this classification, we can reveal important aspects of organizational culture.

The most popular topic of the anecdotes was related to everyday duties or regular celebrations, composing the ordinary reality of the workplace. However, our interviews revealed the events as a source of fun and surprise: Spheres of worktime and playtime, traditionally separated in rational organizations of public administration, seem to melt into one. This effect may be achieved by several different strategies: stressing funny and unusual elements in regular organizational routines, disrupting routines and introducing absurd rituals alongside official ones, or complementing regular duties with funny and subversive comments/elements. An example of the first approach can be found when organizational actors see the everyday lunch break as a particularly funny situation:

*It makes me laugh that there is a custom that as soon as people hear the bells at 12, then immediately all descend to the canteen. This is automatic. Such a strange celebration.*

As for the second approach, interviewees presented a surprising number of their own, unofficial rituals, which overturn the regular way of acting in the workplace. At the same time, these rituals adapt to the workplace environment and create bonds between the employees and the office, suddenly becoming a somewhat private if not intimate sphere. Here, their experiences and stories resemble the tradition of the carnival, a special time when all rules are broken, but it did sustain rather than weaken the regular order:

- *I have a fan here, you see. It has faithfully served us in summer. As you may know, there is no air conditioning in our office, and in July you can literally boil eggs on our desks. The fan's name is Eric and he's a pet of the whole team. Every July 15th we throw him a huge birthday party, we buy a cake and ice*

*cream, sing songs, play and dance. It may seem a little unusual, I know, but in the summer, it's so hot, we just go crazy.*

- *Sometimes our director comes here out of nowhere and says that he's an elephant and starts running around the office like crazy. We all love it!*

At the same time, employees seem to perceive their own group as particularly willing to blur the boundaries between worktime and playtime, which in some cases has led to conflicts with other departments or their superiors. Here, a specific approach to humor and a proclivity to infuse jokes into serious everyday matters is presented as a distinctive characteristic of a specific group of people in the organization who represent an oppressed or suppressed sub-culture within the workplace:

- *Because of the stuff we do, we got an official ban to laugh in the hallway. There have been complaints that the employees of our department just go and laugh, so we got banned. They reminded us that the office was not a circus. Now you can laugh only in closed rooms. Haha.*
- *We have here this ball game called japowe (mug-play) which involves throwing the ball at anyone who enters the office! The principle is one: Do not give a flip in the mug. We did pass the old official papers. But now we don't play as much, cause the other departments don't seem to like our little game. What a shame! It was such a cool game, even Mrs Danuta who's 60 years old scored!*

A subsequent strategy to point out the funny aspects of everyday duties consisted of adding improper comments alongside serious tasks, signaling to co-workers a clear emotional distance from these duties in a way that is somewhat undetectable for outsiders:

*Just look at this letter, it is a great sample of our capabilities. We make proposals for nominations for the Polish-German award for outstanding contributions in the development of Polish-German relations in the field of culture. That's Charles comment: <I nominate Teresa Orlovsky, the pornstar, have you heard of her?>*

As these stories show that humor may be melded into stiff, everyday duties, another category concerned unusual, single events, which for some time caused a suspension of the everyday order:

*Well, I have very fond memories of those days when the roof leaked in the office and water flooded all the rooms. Everyone raged that stuff got damaged. And in my room, documents were totally flooded! In the morning, it turned out that the water leaked through a pile of documents on my desk. They were all damaged so I couldn't work! And I didn't! It felt so great!*

The story also signals distance between the storyteller and the organization, as the crisis is not presented as a problem, but simply as an opportunity to avoid engaging in duties perceived as boring or cumbersome. We may compare this account to children's stories indicating that they are glad that they cannot attend school after a natural disaster; certainly, such an "irresponsible" narration is strictly banned from official communication of serious institutions. However, humorous stories provide a genre through which these feelings-suppressed from official circulation-may be revealed.

Another topic of the stories is related to different training sessions in which interviewees participated as a part of their professional duties and career development opportunities. This type of event can be situated between routine and non-routine events: It is a part of regular working life, but at the same time, constitutes a diversion from everyday routine. It also provides an opportunity to meet people from outside the organization, which creates another source of comicality. Additionally, training seems to provide an excellent opportunity to ridicule the gap between the organizational façade and the reality, and to distance oneself from official requirements:

- *I also wanna say a few words about J. [...] He also conducts those courses on how to write a classified document. And the course goes as follows: First, you need to sit down and switch on the computer (haha), then you have to connect to the intranet, they have these nineties monitors, you know, and then J. says every time: you have to enter the password that everyone knows! (haha). Once when I asked him who actually created that password first, he whispered: „it was the Lord itself- Microsoft“!*
- *One of the strangest things that ever happened to me here was this two-day defense training in shooting! [...] In general, it was late fall, cold, dark, and ugly. We arrived and were greeted by on-site strange people fascinated by the military, both women and men. They were showing their guns, and so on. Creepy! [...] Suddenly, one of the directors screamed: „prepare for shooting!“ I started feeling a bit uneasy. And then I understood what it actually meant. Tons of stews, sausages, cucumbers, lard, vodka, and tea in a thermos appeared unexpectedly on a table in front of us. The vodka bottle was in the shape of a shotgun! Crazy! [...] Their narration was like: War can happen any minute now! They drank, ate, and told stories of never-ending wars!*

As the stories about training essentially are used to expose distance from the official version of reality, one of the narrated stories also included an important twist. In this story, military training, treated by the participants as a "circus," turned out to be more relevant outside the organization than anybody would like to believe:

- *Best thing we had ever was this military action called Serpent two years ago. A real colonel came to our office and said that we had been chosen to participate in a simulation of a military operation in order to prepare for the worst, like war with Russia or something. It was a simulation of defense in case of threats to the country, he told us that the enemy already attacked and that people were fighting in the village. Every morning there was a meeting with the colonel, we were given orders, such as preparing a motivating propaganda movie for soldiers. Everyone treated it as a circus, but when the case with Ukraine broke out, the colonel triumphed, sending “i-told-you-so-messages” to our office.*

The next category of humorous stories was connected openly to the topic of hierarchy in the organization and organizational politics. Anecdotes were used to communicate distance from formal hierarchies, often by ridiculing supervisors, and to share insights about informal ways of building position within the organization. This way, research participants could demonstrate their own competence in understanding the rules of the game and the hidden meaning of banal actions:

- *The hunter-boss complained that one of the girls logged onto his computer into your account and broke it. Well, but he also believes that you can send an email to the tablet and it will be a different email than the one sent to a smartphone or computer.*
- *The director of the HR [human resources] department probably has a deal with the CEO [chief executive officer]. He’s not going to fire people, but instead our director and others too must bring him gifts. Freaking potlach!*

On the other hand, funny stories about hierarchy in the organization spotlight an event when somebody, by accident or ignorance, did not comply with the rules regulating relations between people holding different positions within the organization. In this type of story, interestingly, superiors usually took responsibility to save the face of their subordinates:

- *I also remember the story was about being in a hurry to the airport to fly to Brussels. In the rush, I got into the first official car parked outside, I looked around, and this car seemed to me strangely luxurious, chill-out music, drinks, and all. Before I could realize what was actually happening, the CEO entered, very surprised that I was there. But he kept his composure and asked politely: <Good day, are we travelling together?> I shook my head and ran away like some sort of savage ...*
- *And do you remember how you sat buried in the papers, and someone came and you did not even raise your head? You just scolded something! And it was our CEO doing the rounds in the rooms. He tactfully withdrew, so you would not have to feel bad because you treated him so badly.*

However, in most of the humorous stories, leaders and supervisors of the organization are shown as eccentric, distant figures. We heard sets of stories that ridicule their power, as well as their abilities; these stories are collected and retold to other members of the team, especially newcomers:

- *Did you know that the deputy CEO is an author of a weird erotic novel? There are those freaky things about him that everyone knows about and almost none talks about. One freaky thing is that on his desk, instead of a family pic, he has a picture of himself and a famous strongman. He also has a sword that was bent for him by this strongman. He's also an avid hunter, so there are also many pictures of dead animals on his walls ...*
- *There is this nice story of how our boss had hired an assistant. They went together for a conference. The hunter-boss called him from across the room with a face like he wanted to entrust him with some serious mission and said: <Hey, find me a loo!>*

As the presented stories concerned organizational actors, a distinctive category of anecdotes is built around contacts with outsiders, who have an opaque perception of the office preoccupations and what one may expect from the contact. Our interviewees shared examples of strange visits, calls, and letters:

- *People write lots of letters; for example, there are prisoners writing to complain about the wardens who confiscated their music because it was downloaded illegally. We once wrote a very nice reply that they may have it as long as it's for personal use, then we got another few dozen letters within one week. They were also asking if we can send them any CDs of Kaliber or Peja (Polish rappers).*
- *We also received an anonymous letter sent from Czestochowa. The letter was from a man who called himself a faithful listener of the Polish radio, inhabitant of one of the Polish cities (haha). It contained an original proposal for new regulations. Ending his letter, the Polish radio listener asked our boss to find a way to reply to him even though he did not provide his name or address. Haha! Hilarious!*
- *Once we got a phone call from a nice boy from Russia who asked for autographs on the picture of some actress whom he liked. He assumed that our boss knows how to get it.*

Here, the comicality results from “being mistaken for somebody else” in professional life and, in some cases, from the necessity of resolving the confusion. Thus, the comicality shows the consequences of failure to meet the basic requirement for each organization: to build and maintain the desired image of itself to its environment.



## 7 Limitations and conclusions

Although the research has reached its aims, there were some unavoidable limitations and shortcomings. One in-depth study based on one meeting may not be enough for the researcher to observe the organizational culture, even if the researcher was previously familiarized with it thanks to his or her own professional experience. The very randomness of the meeting with research participants created both benefits (spontaneity) and shortcomings of the study (the time for collecting data was short, and thus, there are constraints on generalizability). Also, the design of methodology with the researcher being previously part of the organization clearly influences the interpretation of the findings from the research.

Nevertheless, several important outcomes of the study can be underlined. During our analysis, we noticed that organizational jokes serve many purposes. First, they enable organizational actors to reach and express the carnivalesque aspects of everyday duties, drawing attention to those aspects of routines that break all the rules, but at the same time, fit into the system. This observation may lead to a broader question concerning the function of subversive behavior in sustaining organizational order. As Yannis Gabriel argued in one of his seminal works, “within every organization, there is a terrain which is not and cannot be managed, in which people, both individually and in groups, can engage in unsupervised, spontaneous activity” (Gabriel 1995, p. 477). Gabriel calls it the *unmanaged organization*, an organizational dream world in which desires, anxieties and emotions find expressions in highly irrational spaces. The main force in this space is fantasy, and its major landmarks include, among others: jokes, gossip and nicknames. In this dream world, emotions prevail over rationality and pleasure over reality.

Second, research participants used humorous stories to build distinctions between themselves and other organizational actors. They stressed being more prone to “fool around” than their co-workers from other units. Here, the interesting question is whether this perception of one’s own group as having a better sense of humor is common in the workplace; it may be important, but overlooked in analysis, and used intuitively as a tool for building *esprit de corps*. Thus, humor may be a cornerstone of workplace culture.

Third, we observed that humor provided an excellent and efficient way to distance oneself (or one’s group) from the official ideology of the organization. Instead of presenting a critique of rules or practices, research participants could simply describe them by stressing their funny or grotesque aspects. Anecdotes were also used to demonstrate that interviewees were perfectly aware of the disparity between façade and reality in organizational life: The contrast between the efforts to

maintain the façade and the inevitable inconsistency between what is told and what is done is often exploited as a source of ridiculousness. The situation of professional training seems to be especially prone to be read this way.

Comicality has different functions in the stories about contact with one's superiors, especially when the person unintentionally did not act according to the hierarchical order. Here, the transgression of an important rule led to embarrassment. According to our tentative interpretation, the comicality of inappropriate comments and/or behavior here resulted from the imposed importance of hierarchy in the organization under scrutiny. Public administration, despite all the changes it has been subject to during the past years, is still an environment in which hierarchy plays an important role; it would be interesting to determine whether this topic also emerges in different types of organizations.

Finally, our interviewees found it funny when they were contacted by people from outside the organization who held false assumptions about their duties and abilities. Thus, humor may emerge as an answer to miscommunication between the organization and its environment about the goal and identity of the former. In group-level research, participants used humor to stress the boundary between themselves and other organizational actors, and their distance from the official ideology; but here, they seemed to identify with the whole organization but feel forced to cope with inadequate expectations.

Based on these conclusions, we can imagine a plethora of applications of the method we have proposed to study organizational life and explore the differences between organizational cultures in different types of organizations and contexts. The study of different uses of humor by people of different cultural backgrounds is not only interesting, but also provides useful tools for the practice of intercultural management. Collecting anecdotes provides excellent access to the informal culture of the organization and may contribute to a better understanding of relations between formal and informal organizational culture. It may also serve as an interesting tool of differentiation within the organization: The study of anecdotes told by different groups of employees in the same organization can serve as an interesting and innovative tool to measure the informal distance between organizational actors.

The organizational anecdotal evidence method links storytelling, organizational anecdotes, and humor studies. Analysis of stories common to organizational actors gives this method both relevance and potential for discovery. Telling anecdotes does not only involve talking back to power and, therefore, its function cannot be narrowed down to a tool of power struggle between workers and management (Fleming and Spicer 2007). Indeed, irony serves as a tool for deconstructing and defusing the official organizational propaganda, and it also helps people distance themselves from their roles. Prejudice, injustice,

and biases become the target of laughter. However, humor is not used only as a weapon of the weak. It is also a tool of communication *par excellence*, and thus, should be studied using an adequate method.

The usefulness of organizational anecdotal evidence is especially valid in studies of power relations, inequality, professional identity, organizational change, and organizational innovations. What all these topics have in common is their bottom-up character. They are important for understanding workplace reality, but at the same time, do not belong to the dominant managerial discourse that prevails in the literature. This kind of study is potentially useful for researchers in the critical management studies tradition. We further propose that studying organizational anecdotes has significant value, should be considered an important branch of storytelling studies, and ought to be recognized as a valid method of organizational research.<sup>3</sup> However, we believe that the methodology can also inspire those who operate within a functional paradigm, which is often considered as oppositional to Critical Management Studies. For functionalists aiming at normative outcomes of their studies, the method is especially promising for exploring the possibility of discovering future trends and directions of organizational change that are encrypted in fiction, where future and possible scenarios are not restricted by pressures from above.

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<sup>3</sup> Some inconsistent attempts have been made in this effort: For instance, Jemielniak (2008) studied the archetypes of computer users shared in anecdotal stories among information technology (IT) specialists on the *slashdot.org* forum. In hundreds of narratives of misunderstandings, slips, and failures, IT support experts described archetypical figures in encounters in the “favorite support story” forum thread. These stories showed that IT specialists construct the user asking for help almost universally as an idiot. Also, the representations described in the stories, apart from their incredible humorous potential, allowed another observation: Personal computer users, by performing the role of the Fool (as depicted in Tarot arcana), experienced and enjoyed a limited freedom from other organizational roles. In some cases, even though the narratives were constructed by the IT specialists themselves, it seemed clear that the seemingly stupid users willingly or not outfoxed the experts.

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## Bionotes

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