'If I Should Fall From Grace…': Stories of Change and Organizational Ethics

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ABSTRACT. Although studies in organizational story-telling have dealt extensively with the relationship between narrative, power and organizational change, little attention has been paid to the implications of this for ethics within organizations. This article addresses this by presenting an analysis of narrative and ethics as it relates to the practice of organizational downsizing. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative and ethics, we analyze stories of organizational change reported by employees and managers in an organization that had undergone persistent downsizing. Our analysis maintains that the presence of a dominant story that seeks to legitimate organizational change also serves to normalize it, and that this, in turn, diminishes the capacity for organizations to scrutinize the ethics of their actions. We argue that when organizational change narratives become singularized through dominant forms of emplotment, ethical deliberation and responsibility in organizations are diminished. More generally, we contend that the narrative closure achieved by the presence of a dominant narrative amongst employees undergoing organizational change is antithetical to the openness required for ethical questioning.

KEY WORDS: ethics in organizations, organizational storytelling, organizational change, narrative, downsizing, Ricoeur

Introduction

Times change. Once upon a time, a loyal and faithful employee might have expected both a career and a gold watch from an employer in whose service they toiled, good years and bad, for 40 years or more. No more. Over the last 20 years, corporate downsizing, in the form of massive layoffs of employees, has become a business-as-usual response as well as a socially legitimate activity for western organizations (Cameron, 1994a; Watson et al., 1999). Today, downsizing is a 'taken-for-granted strategy that is conducive to the maintenance and display of organizational legitimacy' (McKinley et al., 1998, p. 200). In an era of 'new capitalism' characterized by 'stiff international competition, state deregulation of industry, institutional ownership of firms and rapid technological change', organizations have used downsizing in a bid to achieve structural simplicity and flexibility as well as to respond to heightened financial demands (Budros, 1997, p. 229). With the acceleration of 'fast capitalism' (Agger, 1989, 2004), performativity is held as a virtue (Fournier and Grey, 2000) and efficiency has become the primary moral responsibility (Jones, 2003) in such a way as to demand downsizing as a 'managerial obligation' (Lämsä, 1999). Even though downsizing is thought to have 'negative impact on the quality of individual lives and whole communities' (Childs, 1997, p. 123) and generally has unfavourable human effects (Budros, 1997), contemporary discourses of organizational change place such matters second in the managerial moral order (Gowler and Legge, 1983). In this order, a manager's 'duty' is to pursue that which they believe is advantageous to the organization and, if people lose their jobs, then so be it – such matters are morally justified as being incidental to the pursuit of that duty (Lämsä, 1999).

The story above is now a familiar one which serves to structure the meaning of contemporary organizing by providing a ready-made justification through which people in organizations both make sense of their reality and authorize their future-oriented actions (Brown, 1998). Telling this story is a 'hegemonic act required for legitimation purposes' (Humphreys and Brown, 2002, p. 421). However, even though much research has been conducted to show how 'stories can serve as means to provide

legitimacy for organizational changes that might otherwise have been considered illegitimate, irrational or unnecessary' (Rhodes and Brown, 2005a, p. 173), less attention has been paid to their implications for organizational ethics (for exceptions see Humphreys and Brown, 2008; Kornberger and Brown, 2007; Rhodes and Brown, 2005b). Whilst there is a well-established literature on organizational storytelling (see Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 1997, 2004; Gabriel, 2000; Rhodes and Brown, 2005a) and its relation to organizational change (Doolin, 2003; Feldman, 1990; Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Skoldberg, 1994; Stevenson and Greenberg, 1998) and power (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Clegg, 1993; Mumby, 1987; Smith and Keyton, 2001), the place of ethics has remained relatively unexamined. Given that those who exercise power frequently claim ethical justification for their actions in terms of authoritative rhetoric through narratives (Collier, 1998), not the least in the everyday unfolding of organizational action (Kornberger and Brown, 2007), ethics can be regarded as the domain through which power asserts legitimacy (Byers and Rhodes, 2007).

We investigate organizational ethics as they emerge in narratives of organizational change told by people who work in organizations. Our focus is not so much on analyzing the relative ethicality of change, using particular ethical theories or frameworks, but rather we examine 'ethics in practice' by considering those ethics that are already embedded in the mundane activities of organizing and managing (Clegg et al., 2007a). We are interested in the meaning of ethics as it emerges in situated practice, and how this focuses attention on the ethics of some organizational practices, whilst shielding others from such attention.

Empirically, we report research conducted in the Australian operations of a multinational information technology company that we call V-Tech.[1] V-tech had undergone persistent economic problems for 6 years leading up to the commencement of our research in 2006. In the dot.com era of the late 1990s, V-Tech had experienced unprecedented success as a financially prosperous industry leader envied by its competitors. The end of the dot.com boom and associated economic and technological changes, however, did not favour this company. Faced with a declining market and rapidly changing technology, V-Tech failed to maintain its market position. The organization was changing in ways that no one could have envisaged in the heady boom time. Since 2000, there has been persistent and often radical successive cost cutting, restructuring and downsizing. When we began our research in 2005, the staff base had been decimated. When we ended our research in 2006, V-Tech had been de-listed from the stock exchange and had filed for bankruptcy – only to emerge soon after bolstered by a new swag of capital investment in 2007.

We interpret the ways that members of the organization made sense of the changes, through the stories they told about it (Czarniawska, 2004; Weick, 1995); thus, our methodology is narrative. Specifically, we demonstrate how storytelling in V-tech became dominated by a strongly centred narrative (Boyce, 1995) of inevitable decline that was widely shared across the organization – a narrative charting a 'fall from grace' in which the passage from previous success to current failure was understood fatalistically (cf. Barry and Elmes, 1997). In examining the ethics practised in the organization, we reveal how this dominant narrative elicited a sense of pathos that diminished the possibilities both for organizational ethical deliberation and responsibility for downsizing and its consequences. Further, we explore how organizational ethics, when explicit, became limited to considerations of procedural justice associated with the relative fairness with which retrenched personnel were treated by management (cf. Brockner et al., 1994) – a process which arguably served less to ensure ethicality and more to secure the organizations' instrumental goals (Fortin and Fellenz, 2008). We utilise this discussion more generally to illustrate how the dominance and repetition of narratives that legitimate organizational change in the context of new capitalism limit the possibilities of organizational ethics. We acknowledge the argument that the field of business ethics has 'foreclosed' on the breadth of possibilities of the meaning of ethics (Jones et al., 2005). Expanding on this argument, we highlight how such foreclosure is present in localized sites of practice, and is abated by 'narrative closure', namely the 'feeling of finality that is generated when all the questions saliently posed by the narrative are answered' (Carroll, 2007, p. 1). It is such closure that limits the openness required for ethical questioning (Scott, 1990).

The article begins by introducing V-tech, the case organization, and outlines the research methodology used to inform our fieldwork. In examining the stories told of downsizing, we turn to Paul Ricoeur's extensive philosophical study on narrative and ethics (Ricoeur, 1980, 1984, 1991, 1992) as a means to structure our analysis. We locate our study in Ricoeur's (1984) three narrative operations: the prefiguration of practical experience as a set of events that can be made sense of through narratives; the actual configuration of experience into a narrative through the use of plot; and the way that such narratives perform a refiguration of the meaning of experience – especially its ethical meaning. Through telling stories the ethical meaning of practical experience is elucidated and communicated. Using Ricoeur's approach we reveal how ethics was practiced in the context of the events surrounding downsizing at V-Tech. The story of the change as told by members of the organizations, we maintain, was configured as an inevitable fall from grace. Moreover, we contend that the meaning of these narratives of downsizing reduced organizational ethics to how fairly people were treated when retrenched. Therefore, while there were many narratives swarming around the organization, collectively they reinforced a dominant plot which constrained the organization's ability to engage with the ethics of the change it was encountering. Finally, this leads us to conclude how the presence of a strong legitimating narrative in organizational change can limit an organization's capacity for ethical deliberation.

Researching change narratives

All empirical accounts arise somewhere; ours were generated in a far-flung branch of a Silicon Valley success story turned sour. V-Tech is a manufacturer of high technology and leading edge computer equipment for the corporate market. Global in scope, the organization has long been recognized for its technological innovativeness and creativity. We first approached V-Tech's Sydney office in December 2005 to discuss our interest in researching ethics in a dynamic high technology environment. Our first meeting was with the Managing Director of the Australian Operation – Mike Ristro. Mike outlined the large-scale downsizing that the

organization had accomplished and continued to undertake. We asked Mike what impact this had on the culture and morale of V-Tech – expecting the worst. His response surprised us. According to Mike, the actual situation at V-Tech in Australia was one where voluntary staff turnover was low, and work motivation was high – a view that, as we discovered, was more or less confirmed by most of the people we subsequently interviewed. Mike explained that this was the case not only in relation to employee layoffs but also in the face of other cost-cutting exercises, such as employee benefits having been reduced and pay levels not being increased for 5 years. We were intrigued.

After further correspondence, we reached an agreement to conduct fieldwork at V-Tech that would explore the impact of the downsizing, focusing specifically on the relationship between organizational change and employee perceptions of the ethicality of the organization. Throughout 2006, we engaged in detailed fieldwork including naturalistic observations and analysis of internal documentation and other communication materials. The main source of our data came from semi-structured narrative interviews (Mishler, 1986) with staff members at all levels. All the Australian-based members of the organization were invited to participate, with more than half agreeing. A total of 32 interviews were conducted across all three of the organization's sites. Fourteen people were interviewed in Sydney, thirteen in Melbourne and five in Brisbane.

The interviews focused on eliciting narrative accounts of the changes that the organization had been undergoing. They were directed at encouraging respondents to outline the changes that had been undertaken, and to identify their assessment of their meaning for them and the organization (Rhodes and Brown, 2005a). Given what we already knew about the downsizing, we specifically asked all the respondents to discuss this aspect of the organization's activities and history. The interviews covered a standard interview schedule, while being flexible enough to enable interviewees to tell stories about issues that mattered to them. The questions concerned how the changes had affected them and the organization, what they thought of the way that the changes had been managed, what they considered to be the ethical implications of the changes, and what

they expected for the future of the organization. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours and were recorded and fully transcribed for the purpose of conducting a narrative analysis.

The interview encouraged participants to tell their stories by making meaningful and sensible connections that explain the passage from past to present, and to an imagined future. Such accounting for the past, present and the future is what Ricoeur (1984) calls a 'threefold present' that combines memory and prediction in the moment of narrative. The interview transcripts provided us with 'stories about a certain action or situation, about critical events […] or about unique or even routine experience' (Hutchinson and Wilson, 1995, p. 307). The research findings were a form of co-narration (Langellier, 1989) that emerged from the intersection of our interests in change, narrative and ethics, and the participants' experience as they chose to share it with us as the researchers. Reflexively, we recognized that in making sense out of research, we were constructing a narrative that is 'ours', assembled as it is out of what we were told as well as what we observed (Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997). Our reflexive position in relation to this was not so much to assemble the 'facts' of the changes, but rather to try to understand the ways that members of the organization made sense of the changes through their own storytelling. We analyzed the data independently and then discussed our interpretations to ensure reliability of the findings. We listened to and interpreted different narratives that circulated through the organization to appreciate the ethical positions that people had developed in relation to the downsizing.

In our reading and analysis of what people told us, we were sensitive to identifying narratives that reflected dominant/powerful means of understanding ethics. Our focus was on how people accounted for the organizational changes in the narratives they told about it (Keenoy et al., 1997). The narratives embedded in the interviews were read and re-read so as to discover how they reflected the ethical norms of the organization (De Graaf, 2001; Randels, 1998) and how those norms informed practice (Clegg et al., 2007a; Ellis and Flaherty, 1992). The analysis involved detecting the shared plots that the people in the organization used to organize their experience through a 'collective centring' that reflected cultural meanings across the organization (Boyce, 1995). In writing about this, we have selected extracts from those interviews which we felt best communicated the cultural narrative of the organizational change as it was present in the organization across different regions, different departments, and at different levels of seniority. This analysis was of course supported by our observations of V-tech.

From the outset, our attention had been drawn to the claim that voluntary staff turnover had remained low and people remained loyal to the organization, despite the persistent downsizing. As we planned the research, we were keen to investigate both if this really was the case – rather than an instance of managerialist rhetoric – and, if so why. We had been quite open about this with the managing director when we began the field work, and he confirmed that this was something that warranted investigation. Our interpretation of possible explanations developed through the data collection, as we regularly met during the fieldwork and during data analysis and writing. Initially, we were surprised when almost all the people we interviewed accepted the downsizing as an acceptable practice, despite the fact that their job security was at risk and the company appeared to be gradually honing in on ultimate failure. It was only about half way through the process of completing the interviews that we began to see a common plot emerging across the many different stories told to us by many different people – as we detail after the next section of the article, the plot that became evident was that of an 'inevitable fall from grace'.

The purpose of narrative research is to 'see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives' (Riessman, 2002, p. 218). Our research thus sought to identify this ordering as a way to understand the common organizational meanings ascribed to organizational events. While we cannot offer the explanatory guarantees of reliability and validity that ritually accompany a scientific experiment, we do take the collective nature of the narrative as a form of validation of the 'trustworthiness' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of the interpretation. In these terms, 'validity is treated as an expression of craftsmanship, with an emphasis on quality of research by checking, questioning, and theorizing on the nature of the phenomena investigated' (Kvale,

1995, p. 19). In order to achieve this at a practical level, the authors checked, questioned and theorized both individually and collectively. In proceeding in this manner, we were reflexively concerned with whether the plot we ascribed to the interviews was something that provided a valid and reliable assessment of the shared understanding of the organization by its members. Was this a plot that we, as researchers, had imposed on the interview data, or was it endemic to it? Our response here was to consider the validity of our findings in terms of how 'the plot – a meaningful structure – was put there by the actors in their attempt to manage meaning, but it could be recognized (perhaps wrongly) by the researcher who had access to the same common repertoire of plots' (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006, p. 204). Following the field work, we thoroughly analyzed the interview data to ensure that people's description of the organizational downsizing consistently and commonly drew on this plot to inform their meaning of the organization and its changes. Through the analysis and re-analysis of the interview data, we concluded that the 'fall from grace' plot was one that had developed as a collective narrative shaping the culture of the organization.

Analyzing ethical practice with narrative

While our data gathering was primarily focused on eliciting narratives of change from members of the organization, the analysis focused on the ethics of that change. Analytically, we were informed by Ricoeur's (1984) theorization of the three operations through which narratives represent action in the world. Ricoeur names these operations prefiguration, configuration and refiguration.[2] These are operations which creatively combine elements of experience into a narrative so as to make that experience meaningful and sensible (Ricoeur, 1980). Ricoeur's three narrative operations work together such that a narrative represents the unfolding of meaningful action over time, and, as we go on to explain, relate directly to ethics. With the first narrative operation, prefiguration, Ricoeur is referring to the way that narratives, as a principal mode of human communication, provide an understanding of lived experience (Ellos, 1994). With prefiguration we already know that human experience can be represented in

the form of narrative (Simms, 2003) comprising structural components (e.g. what, why, who and when), symbolism (the values assumed to be associated with particular actions) and temporality (the way that the events are connected together through time) (Ellos, 1994). Prefiguration provides the potential for narration because it suggests that events in the world can be explained and made meaningful through when represented in the narrative form. In our case, prefiguration is what justified our methodological approach, namely the knowledge that people can and do make sense of their worlds through storytelling.

Even though narrative is prefigured in human culture, it is through configuration that particular narratives are told. Configuration involves the creation of a narrative through the use of a plot that organizes the events; this plot being 'the intelligible whole that governs the succession of events in any story' (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 171). The plot is the means through which people can actively organize their experience so as to make it meaningful. What this means is that the same events can be communicated through quite different narratives so long as a different plot is used to organize them – in this way, narrative is both a recounting of what has happened and an 'exercise in creativity' (Ellos, 1994, p. 101). To understand configuration is to understand the meaning of events, not just the events themselves. Ricoeur asserts that 'making a narrative resignifies the world in its temporal dimension, to the extent that narrating, telling, reciting is to remake action' (p. 81) in the creative act of telling a story. In configuring events into a narrative, those events are made into a meaningful whole that establishes the relationships between incidents and actions (Simms, 2003). Telling stories renders the world comprehensible by connecting raw experience with human interpretation (Ellos, 1994, p. 102). Commonly this is achieved through the use of 'strong plots' in which culturally accepted ways of telling stories provide a 'blueprint for the management of meaning' (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006, p. 198) – plots which have been oft-repeated and come to be accepted as the way that stories should be told.

Despite the fact that configuration is a process that can help us understand the meaning of organizational change, to approach ethics we need

Ricoeur's third narrative operation – refiguration. Refiguration registers that narrative is not just about one person's understanding of their experience but also involves the way that narratives are received and interpreted by others (Ricoeur, 1991). Refiguration implies 'the role of the interpretive reader' (Ellos, 1994, p. 102); it relates to the 'point' of the narrative (Simms, 2003) 'in the field of communication' (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 71). With refiguration, a narrative 'reaches its fulfilment' (ibid.) as it is received, 'read' and repeated by others. It is this repetition that constitutes the way that particular narratives can constitute a shared understanding of the meaning of particular experiences. The relationship between narrative and culture resides in the way in which different people use shared plots to make sense of the same experience – plots that become established as 'normal' when stories get told again and again in the same general configuration. It is through the establishment of such norms that narrative relates to ethics – the creation of means through which experience can be judged. As Ricoeur explains, there is 'no ethically neutral narrative' and that 'narrativity serves as the propaedeutic [preparatory introduction] to ethics' (1992, p. 115) because it furnishes the way in which the relative merit of human action can be evaluated.

Ricoeur's three operations of narrative help prepare people to deal with everyday life and its ethical evaluation. They do so by providing a way of understanding the 'estimations, evaluation, and judgments of approval and condemnation' (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 115). In our everyday understandings we tell and repeat stories so as to make ethical sense of those things we do and are done to us (Ellos, 1994, p. 115); hence, narratives always contain ethics because 'in the exchange of experiences which the narrative performs, actions are always subject to approval or disapproval and agents to praise or blame' (Ricoeur, 1993, p. 164). Narratives focus attention on those actions that are positioned as being subject to such ethical scrutiny and those which are not. Our concern in analyzing the relations between organizational change, storytelling and ethics is with how narrative involves both the description and moral evaluation and action. It is to the character of narrative and ethics at V-Tech that we now turn.

The configuration: V-Tech fallen from grace

The reversal in V-Tech's fortunes was catastrophic. In the mid-1990s, the organization had been riding on a wave of financial success and was generally regarded as the most innovative firm in its market. As the 1990s came to a close, however, the computer industry was changing. With developments in personal computing, the types of products and services that could once only be delivered by specialist companies with expensive technical infrastructure were becoming increasingly cheap and available.[3] V-Tech did try to invest in different technologies to mitigate the erosion of their core markets, but these decisions proved unsuccessful and, in some cases, disastrous. The financial implications of this were significant: the company's market capitalization in the mid-2000s being less than 2% of what it was in the 1990s. The passage between these two points was one of continual unprofitability and a spiralling program of cost cutting and downsizing. We conducted our research when the viability of the company was in grave question and when year-on-year layoffs had become a normal part of the organization's operations. As the HR manager Vivian said to us, 'everybody has known for the last couple of years it [retrenchment] could happen to them'. Every year more and more retrenchments were announced until no one felt safe in the workforce.

The effects of the organization's decline were evident in the spatial arrangements of the main office in Sydney where we conducted many of the interviews. At the entrance, there was a reception desk which we had to pass every time we went in. However, there was no receptionist. The receptionist had long since been retrenched, and in her place was an electronic button that one had to be press to alert a member of the administrative staff to come and unlock the door to let visitors in. Once in the office, which was painted in vibrant colours, the place seemed eerily empty. Few people were present and many of the desks were void of any materials, as the lease on the office space pre-dated the most recent rounds of retrenchments. Even when the managing director offered us a cup of coffee on our first visit, he made it for us himself.

When we interviewed the employees at V-Tech, they clearly understood the present state of the organization in relation to its past. In the words of

the Managing Director of the Australian operations, Mike, in the past it had all 'seemed more fun'. Mike had witnessed at first hand not only the decline in the company's financial performance on a global scale, but also the cultural and identity changes that developed with it. When discussing this he said to us:

> Every office had beer in the fridge and all sorts of other stuff that we just don't pay for any more. We used to have big parties and all sorts of stuff that has an impact on culture but as we've been making loss after loss we've cut those sorts of things. So we've become more hard edged than we were, somewhat more disciplined which is a necessity of our situation.

V-Tech's past, characterized by informality, is directly linked to its financial performance. Mike talked of a carefree organization whose pursuit of 'customer intimacy and technical differentiation' meant that the focus was less on operational efficiency and financial prudence and more on excessiveness. However, that was in a past that was now long gone. Dick, V-Tech's finance manager, also discussed the 'culture of excess' as a hallmark of the past. Dick recalled the days when 'the company that was known for, you know, 'go to a meeting, get a t-shirt'. He is referring here to the way that the company freely spent money on its staff in relation to company events. Many others similarly recalled the way that the organization would regularly present staff with lavish prizes for performance, such as all-expenses paid family holidays. Such excessiveness extended to customers as well. Dick told us that: 'they had a luxurious customer briefing centre – very, very impressive – and they scrapped it'. The emergent narrative configuration drew a temporal relation between past excesses and current impoverishment. Dick recounted to us the most minute (but meaningful) ways in which things had changed – for example, the company no longer even provided milk for employees to use for coffee in team meetings and at work. He told us that 'they' [regional head office] had said 'No more milk. If you want milk, bring it from home'.

Mike and Dick's comments suggest a plot where the culture of excess associated with the past was not just a matter of securing material self interest through company hand-outs, but displayed a more general character that identified the organization with

lavishness and a focus on creativity rather than efficiency. It was organizational plenitude, an abundance of materiality expressed in food and drink. IT specialist David, another long standing member of staff, commented:

> It was a company that had phenomenal growth in the industry, had lots of money. They were always at the forefront of R&D. They were always bringing out exciting new products. They were spending lots of money on staff. So, it was quite an exciting place to be. I suppose it is analogous to some of the more upstarts, like Google, which has gone through phenomenal growth in the last couple of years. That was kind of V-Tech and everyone wanted to join the company.

David's account suggests the excess characterizing the older organization, as understood in the present, made it exciting and vibrant for everyone involved. The nostalgic past of abundance was represented as a place where it seemed that nothing could go wrong. As another staff member summed it up: 'it was so much fun and more motivating'. In terms of the movement from Ricoeur's prefiguration to configuration, what we can see from these extracts is how the changes that the organization had undergone were prefigured by a mode of temporal and narrative comparison in which the present was understood in relation to a transition from the past.

We can connect the narrative of V-Tech to elements of the classic plot of Greek tragedy where, on account of the tragic flaw of hubris, the hero (in this case the organization), is led into catastrophe. It was this narrative configuration, we observed, that served as a structure for the retrospective accounting (Garfinkel, 1967) that made the present organizational situation meaningful to the people who worked there. In order to understand their situation, they drew on narrative resources from more general culture. In this case, the plot was a narrative mechanism that helped explain the uncertainty and insecurity surrounding the restructuring (cf. Brown and Humphreys, 2003; Gabriel, 1999). The fall from grace' plot cast the problems of the present as understood in relation to recollection of the perfection of an Eden-like past.

The 'fall from grace' narrative was accepted and repeated across the organization. Indeed, what we found quite remarkable was the general acceptance of both the financial misfortunes of the company and its

practice of laying off staff – not everyone liked it, but they knew that was just the way things were, and so there was no reason to get overly worked up when it happened. Equally surprising were the high levels of morale throughout the Australian branches that we visited – this was not an organization of disgruntled or angry people who blamed the organization or their managers for the organization's misfortune; instead, they showed great commitment to their work. When we asked people about the reason for this, they told us quite directly that despite the instability and job insecurity, the company was a good place to work because of unique and exclusive products, leading edge technology, massive investment in project work, respect for customers, high levels of employee autonomy in decision making and heterarchical structures.

All the people interviewed had appreciated flexible working conditions and hours, training provisions, the payment of external education fees and a 'fun' culture. A high emphasis was placed on fostering interpersonal relationships and associating work with socializing. The general view was summed up to us by David, when he said: 'People are still loyal. The company is still a good place to work but during all this downsizing I think it's kind of lost its identity a little bit.' Consequently, the majority of the people we spoke to hoped that the company would be able to reverse its bad fortunes (even though most suggested that they did not believe that it would). We asked one of the middle managers whether he thought the new global CEO would be able to turn the company around. In response, he said something with which nearly all our respondents were in general agreement with: 'I just don't think he will be able to because of some inherent problems with the company'. In qualifying this he went on to say: 'I hope against hope that I'm wrong'.

The stoical acceptance of the company's fall from grace and the ensuing downsizing was echoed in Vivian, the HR Manager's comment: 'so if I don't want to live with that [potential retrenchment] hanging over me, I either leave or find another job or I stay and if it happens to me then so be it.' Although she did not mention it to us at the interview, several weeks later, we were informed that Vivian had left her job to take up a similar position in another industry. Nevertheless, Vivian's comments reflect a narrative of inevitability that suggests the cultural view that to be troubled or anxious

about potential job loss would be futile. Better, it seems, to accept the bad fate of the organization and make the best of it while one can. It was not so much that the downsizing was regarded as being 'right' or 'wrong' in the sense of being subject to ethical scrutiny – downsizing was just the way that it was, the narrative had been made to fit. What was becoming apparent was that with the change being narrated as inevitable, it was seen as outside of the purview of ethical deliberation; the narrative protected people from the burden of either accepting responsibility or ascribing blame.

As a member of the administrative staff, Penny explained to us that this attitude to downsizing had developed over time rather than having always been present:

> In the early days when we started downsizing, it was a real shock. It rattled a lot of people but we've gone through this, like every six months we have another cutback and so we just sort of sit through it now.

Another administrative employee, Jenny, expressed a similar sentiment: 'People that are here, we're just complacent. We've been through it before; we'll just do it again, if it's us, good luck to them.' Some employees had not just accepted the downsizing as inevitable but still sought to justify it. As Danny from the sales department said to us:

> If we're going to survive, people have got to make decisions, they've got to execute them and people have got to live with them and move forward instead of [saying] 'well that was a pretty damn bad decision', grumbling for six weeks about it, not getting things done, not working out, trying to work out a way forward, and just getting off their butts and doing the things they need to do, to make those changes succeed. I think a lot of realization has come to that.

The 'realization' that Danny talked about was about adopting a position that sought not to question the decisions regarding downsizing, but just to get on with things in acceptance of the new order.

The refiguration of V-tech and the limiting of ethical concerns

In trying to piece together the narrative that informed the culture of V-Tech, we can summarize

that the stories told to us were ones where the continual financial losses and downsizing were configured into a meaningful plot that explained those events in relation to the stoical acceptance of an inevitable decline. While the narrative included the reversal of fortune classically present in tragedy it lacked tragedy's cathartic element; tragedy's 'fear and pity' was replaced with fatalism. The events that transpired in the organization were narratively configured as a stoical response to pathos. The narrative, much as any other, 'drew a meaningful story from a diversity of events or incidents' – more particularly, however, it used the fall from grace plot to mediate 'between events and a narrated story' (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 65). The configured plot was a 'synthesis of the heterogeneous' that 'grasped together' the incidents (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 66) in a way that not only normalized them, but also made them appear inevitable. It is on account of this inevitability, we now argue, that the scope of moral scrutiny narratively available was significantly limited because it downplayed the agency of the characters in the story. Where there is inevitability there can be no responsibility as agency is ascribed to fate rather than to persons expected to be masters of whatever fate threw at them.

The question to still be asked of V-Tech's narrative is: if the organization was not held responsible for its own decline or for the loss of jobs, what was it held responsible for? In interviewing people, one of the main issues that we discussed was their perception of the ethics of the downsizing. The responses from the people at V-Tech to the persistent downsizing reinforces the perspective that procedural justice is the main responsibility of the organization to employees; that is that the main moral requirement for organizations is to ensure that people being laid off receive fair treatment (Lämsä, 1999). When we asked employees to comment on the organization's ethics relating to the decline and downsizing, 28 of the 32 people interviewed responded with primary reference to the procedural justice of the retrenchment process. Of these 28, 22 expressed the view that the organization managed this process well, two felt that the organization had generally not managed it well, and four provided mixed responses suggesting that on some occasions it was managed well and on others badly. What this meant was the organizational narrative had constructed the mean-

ing of the changes such that job loss and financial misfortune themselves were not seen as a matter that concerned ethics – the only 'moral mandate' (Mullen and Skitka, 2006) that the employees held their organization to was the requirement for people to be treated fairly on departure. In this case, the perception of a high level of procedural justice reduced the sense of adversity among both those retrenched and those who remained (Brockner et al., 1994) while apparently being used instrumentally (rather than ethically) to control employee behaviour (Fortin and Fellenz, 2008).

The narrative worked to refigure the ethical scope of the organization's attentions, as well as to justify them fatalistically. Indeed, when we spoke with Mike (the managing director) he was quick to underline this:

> I think we've always paid a lot of attention to the process of reducing the force and treating everyone with fairness and respect, and spent a lot of time on the very tough to communicate 'what happens afterwards' with the people that remain because it's painful for people to go obviously […] it's a horrible thing to have to put on your resume [but] I'm very good at reducing organization size and keeping staff. I do think it's something we do well.

Prompted very specifically about ethics, he added: 'in my personal view I think we handled it incredibly ethically', and later he commented that 'I think our company has a very strong view on ethics'. It was not just Mike, as the managing director, who secured a sense of ethicality by limiting the domain of ethics; it came across through staff at all levels. Margaret, a personal assistant to one of the executives, justified the retrenchments as follows:

> And see I wouldn't fight it because I just look at it thinking, it's not a big, huge profitable company that is trying to make more money. It's a company struggling to succeed so I see what they're doing is for the benefit of the staff plus the stockholders, so I don't see what they're doing is wrong.

As Margaret makes clear, if she were to be retrenched, it would not be something that would be ethically wrong. She indicated that her sense of morality as it related to the narrative configuration of the organization's decline was linked to the realpolitik of commerce –the poor fortune of the organi-

zation provides the moral justification for layoffs. Moreover, a number of people we spoke to expressed the view that the organization had become much more ethical in its retrenchment practices the more that it engaged in it. The V-Tech narrative, retrenching people well was held up as an organizational virtue. Such a view is consonant with the way that managerialist accounts of downsizing are generally justified in relation to ethics. While examinations of the relations between ethics and downsizing has only recently begun (McKinley et al., 2000; Orlando, 1999), they are largely limited to discussions of employee perceptions of the fairness of decisions made to downsize, and deliberations over the 'most ethical' means through which downsizing can be executed (Lämsä, 1999). When ethics is considered in relation to employees, the focus is on the demands of the process on managers (Lämsä, 1999; Lämsä and Takala, 2000) and how the 'negative effects' can be buttressed, at least to some extent, by 'good' management practice (Palmer et al., 1997). What this suggests is that the refiguration at play in V-Tech was very much embedded in a more general managerial narrative that sought to limit the ethics of downsizing-related change. The moral of the stories is the same.

It was with some pride that both managers and employees boasted about how good they were at downsizing. As one of the office administrators, Jenny, told us:

> We don't do it as bad as we used to. In the first couple that we've done and you instantly had to leave and that was really bad. But I think they've [management] learned from that and they don't do that any more, they give people notice so they can work out, work for four weeks or they can work a couple of days to finalize things and then leave. So they're here to say goodbye to people and that's why I don't think it's so bad anymore.

In summary, what we see at V-Tech is the way that the configuration of the downsizing refigured ethics within the narrow bounds of procedural matters. If debate or dissensus occurred over the organization's ethicality, it was limited to this issue. Moreover, not all in the organization shared the view that V-Tech managed the retrenchment process quite so well – the stories were not consistent. Andrew, a project manager, commented:

> I think there have been certain situations whereby people have been dismissed from the organization while they've been overseas, out of communication. I deplore that kind of behaviour in an organization. If they're going to be up front, if they're going to be dismissing somebody, they should have the grace and responsibility to do it face-to-face.

Andrew offers a moral critique of the company's behaviour, but it is noteworthy that he does so in the terms of procedural justice. The narrative thus allowed for debates over ethics to occur, but ensured that differences were kept with tight bounds. Indeed, the only contentious issues that were raised in relation to the organization's ethics revolved around procedural matters. For the HR manager, Vivian, this meant that retrenchment should not be used as a reason to 'get rid' of someone whose performance was poor:

> Often managers will prefer to make someone redundant than to performance manage them out. I mean that's one of the things that, you know, I'd really dig my heels in about and the manager wanted to do that.

Her criticism of the company's managers was one that suggested that people should only be retrenched for reasons of managerial rationality and that to do otherwise would be morally wrong, a view reinforced by the general staff as well. As Penny, a middle manager, told us:

> I think some of the retrenchments are made to get rid of people. Not their position, I think there have been clashes in management and they're under-performing so it's easier than going through the performance managing of this person, it's easier to retrench them.

When we spoke to Joanne from the marketing department, she made a similar point saying: 'My only comment would be that I think they do make personal decisions with retrenchments and I think that shouldn't be what happens'. Similar criticisms were raised in relation to cases where a person was retrenched, and then some time later brought back into the organization because their skills were still required. Not only was this seen as an example of poor decision making but also as an injustice to other employees. Even Mike, the managing director, commented on such cases: 'That would be the only thing I think anyone would say in our ethical

behaviour that was questionable'. It is clear from such comments that it is only such decision making and procedural matters that concern the realm of ethics – these are the only things he believes that anyone would or should question. The dominant narrative was in place and within it no moral questioning about why the downsizing was necessary, or whether or not it should have occurred seemed permissible.

The above accounts suggest that members of V-Tech's staff had differing views on the extent to which the downsizing was done 'ethically', but the terms on which they made this judgment are consistent. For V-Tech, this suggests that while there were many actual narrations, there was only one dominant narrative configuration within which they were both constructed and interpreted. Thus, although the narrative performances of V-Tech's employees may have been 'polyphonic' and open to multiple interpretations (Boje, 1995; Cunliffe et al., 2004; Kornberger et al., 2006), the narrative configuration of that plurality was distinctly singular. Following Ricoeur (1980), this suggests that the narrative had become an established 'tradition' in this organization – the narrative was a 'communal act of repetition, which is at the same time a new founding act [i.e. a new story] and a recommencement of what has already been inaugurated [i.e. a common narrative] (p. 189). Ethically, this meant that while there were disagreements about what had actually happened in the past, a consistent view in terms of what should happen was shared, and it is at this point, that the ethics of narrative refiguration takes place, the point where the narrative instructs rather than describes. That there was such consistency suggested the depth of the cultural embeddedness of the value of, and focus on, procedural justice as being equivalent to ethics, while at the same time distancing itself from moral questions of values (Fortin and Fellenz, 2008). Staff may have different views on whether it was done correctly but when asked about the ethics of downsizing, they invariably commented on this particular process. When questioned about the ethics of downsizing, those people who criticized V-Tech's behaviour consistently did so in terms of the process of deciding and executing the retrenchments, rather than anything else.

Ethics, change and the circle of narrative

As we have discussed in this article so far, the narrative organization of the downsizing at V-Tech worked to configure the change events through a plot that not only rationalized the inevitability of the downsizing but also refigured the scope of the ethical agency of the organization. By considering this in terms of how Ricoeur's three narrative operations were at play, we have seen how the ethical character of the organization and the organizational change emerged from the plot that dominated the stories told by people in the organization. We note that the plot that we are calling 'the inevitable fall from grace' is the way that the general narrative at V-Tech was configured – it was the 'the act of assembling the events together […] which makes the story followable' (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 67). In this case, the events in question were the decline, downsizing and layoffs, and they are narratively configured these events in such a way as to suggest their inevitability. It is this inevitability, however, that links into the refiguration of the events and connects most precisely to ethics. Refiguration is the process through which the narrative is received and accepted; it talks back to practice because it reformulates the meaning of the events. Ethics come into play in the way that they perform 'functions of discovery and transformation' with respect to the 'feelings and actions' of those who enact and react to change (Ricoeur, 1993, p. 164). In the case of V-Tech, these feelings can be summed up as a form of collective pathos for the organization, one that limited the demands for both agency and ethical deliberation on its part. What this meant was that although downsizing and layoffs might, in general, be thought of in terms of a broad range of deleterious human effects (Budros, 1997; Childs, 1997), the narrative organization of change at V-Tech placed narrow limits on the domain of ethics. Essentially, ethics were constituted as procedural, in terms that were aligned with what, in business more generally, is regarded as 'best practice' downsizing (Cameron, 1994b). As we saw at V-Tech there were many different views of the extent to which ethicality was achieved, but all views were organized within the more general accepted organizational narrative. The result was that despite many different 'antenarratives' (Boje, 2001) and stories

told, there was in this organization one overarching plot within which these made sense.

The narrative understanding of the organization as a victim rather than agent of its own failure worked to inform both the possibilities and necessities of future action. The narrative organization of V-Tech incorporated the threefold present (Ricoeur, 1984) so as to explain the present circumstances in relation to the past, as well to inform and predict the future – a future imagined as consisting of continued economic decline and of more downsizing. The acceptance of inevitability was not only a narrative mechanism that defined the boundaries of what was to be considered ethical, it also provided a convenient means through which members of the organization could imagine escaping the 'moral mazes' (Jackall, 1988) in which they might otherwise have been lost. There was a 'collective centring' (Boyce, 1995) by which a dominant plot had been institutionalized. Through the plot of inevitability the employees provided an ethical justification for the ongoing loss of jobs and the general demise of the organization. In sum, the three operations of narrative were simultaneously at play at V-Tech. The narrative of the organization's decline was clearly evident to all involved through the diminishing financial fortunes of the organization (prefiguration). What the storytelling practices in the organization did, however, was to employ this decline into a narrative that rendered it meaningful (configuration); the meaning that emerged came in the form of pathos where the employees held a sense of sympathy for their organization, yet at the same time, did not regard the organization as having adequate agency or power to forge a heroic narrative of recovery. Taken together, the way that the people at V-Tech both recounted and interpreted these narratives (refiguration) released the organization from ethical responsibility for its own actions. This implies that the adoption of the 'fall from grace' plot was a means through which V-Tech's employees could avoid either taking or ascribing responsibility for negative effects of the organizational change – after all, one cannot be morally responsible for that for which is inevitable.

The narrative refiguration at V-Tech served to diminish the 'ethical vitality' (Rhodes et al., 2008) of the organization by rendering it as lacking the adequate character successfully to negotiate its changing environment and changing fortunes. It was not that the organization was 'unethical' in its decision making (Christensen and Kohls, 2003) but rather that its decision-making processes were narratively refigured to be largely outside the ethical domain because the narrative positioned the organization as not being accountable for its fate. We see this as a demonstration of how the play of narrative can support an 'adiaphorization' (Bauman, 1993) of organizational responsibility, in the sense that it removes 'the effects of action beyond the reach of moral limits' (p. 125). Here the moral obligation of top management was to 'act in the best interest of the firm […and…] the legal obligation of the firm not to violate the rights of employees' (Hopkins and Hopkins, 1999, p. 145). The new narrative is that employees expect downsizing and layoffs to happen from time to time as an anticipated perturbation in their portfolio career (Tempest and Starkey, 2004); it is not a matter for ethical deliberation, it is just the way things are. In the present age, this is a normal part of the ethics practiced in business.

Moreover, our analysis suggests that the narrative closure (Carroll, 2007) both enabled and reflected a more general tendency to the foreclosure of ethics in business settings (Jones et al., 2005). At V-Tech, this was achieved precisely because the moves through the cycles of prefiguration, configuration and refiguration established a dominant mode of emplotment, repeated again and again in the organization, one that limited the possibilities of what could be meant by ethics. Narrative closure constrained the forms of questioning and openness argued to be the condition of ethical deliberation (Clegg et al., 2007b). If it is the case that ethics in organizations are characterized by difficulties, deliberations and dilemmas (Clegg and Rhodes, 2006; Roberts, 2003), then the presence of strong and closed narratives concerning ethics are anathema to open ethical deliberation. Although it has been argued extensively in the critical literature that business ethics cannot be reduced to codes and rules (Clegg and Rhodes, 2006; Letiche, 1998; Munro, 1998; Parker, 2002; Roberts, 2003) what our narrative analysis adds is the observation that such of these are not only limited to 'bureaucratic rules and laws' (Parker, 1998, p. 294) but also include tacit rules embedded in narrative which become a 'propaedeutic' for ethics (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 115).

Conclusion

The article presented an analysis of the 'ethics in practice' of organizational change embodied in narrative. By connecting organizational storytelling with ethics, we have explored how the social and discursive construction of ethics emerged through the cultural narration of organizational experience by employees. Following Ricoeur (1984), we demonstrated how narrative moves from description to prescription, namely the way that institutionally normalized and accepted narratives contain within them ethical models that provide social means for evaluating the relative goodness of particular actions and the delimitation of which actions are open to ethical scrutiny. Further, this demonstrated how narrative can work to shelter organizations from moral responsibility for their actions. The meaning of organizational change can be positioned and repositioned in relation to the 'ethical', or 'unethical' (Parker, 1998) and narrative is central to such positioning.

In having examined the dominant narrative used at V-Tech to make sense of the changes that were implemented, even though we provided a critique that suggests that this narrative limited the scope of ethical deliberations, we are not suggesting that this narrative was somehow inaccurate or 'wrong'. A key distinction in the analysis of narrative is that between story and narrative discourse, namely the series of events themselves (the story), and the mode through which they are represented (the narrative discourse) (Abbott, 2002). What this means is that a particular story can be told in many different ways and with different effects (Rhodes and Pullen, 2009). This means that story and narrative discourse depend on each other, with narrative furnishing a means through which the meaning of organizational events is created and maintained – a narrative is one of many ways of telling a story. Moreover, when one way of telling a story becomes dominant and widely shared in an organization this will have the effect of limiting other possible meanings, and hence other possible actions. In V-tech we argue that the dominant narrative of the 'fall from grace' was such that it limited the possible ethical meanings of organizational actions.

The major normative implication of our research for ethical practice in organizations is that because the presence of strong collective narratives in organizations can limit the scope of ethical deliberation and action, organizations seeking to engage in organizational change ethically should encourage debate, critique and contestation over the meaning of those events. In order to do so, they would engage in an 'ethical vitality' (Rhodes et al., 2008) whereby the presence of multiple and competing interpretations of organizational change would highlight the need for individuals to take a more active role in both making sense of their organizations and taking action within them. Practically, this would suggest that dominant narratives, such as those in V-Tech, needs to be actively contested and disrupted to create an organizational environment conducive to active ethical deliberation.

The research draws some important implications for the understanding of organizational change, organizational ethics, and organizational storytelling, and the relations between them. Our inquiry concurs with the more general conclusion that downsizing, as a central practice of contemporary organizational change, has become a business-as-usual change practice in organizations (Cameron, 1994a, Watson et al., 1999). However, we have also seen how this is manifested in the particular way that the narrative of an organization is developed, performed and repeated in terms of a managerial matter-of-factness. Here, the normalcy of organizational change became established precisely in relation to the narrative and temporal telling of the organization's history. In terms of organizational ethics, we have shown how the narrative configuration of an organization's history works to establish the boundaries around which ethicality is (and is not) accounted for in contexts of organizational change, and to foreclose the breadth of possibilities for ethical deliberation. While individuals in an organization might disagree over the degree of ethicality that an organization exhibits, the presence of dominant organizational narratives frame the meaning of those acts that are available for ethical scrutiny and those which are not. Finally, in terms of organizational storytelling, we have examined the relation between narrative, change and ethics in organizations. We have done this by demonstrating how the operation of refiguration, as a third and often overlooked aspect of organizational narrative, is indeed critical to ethics. The implication is that organizational

narratives are best regarded as ethical in character in that they not only suggest ways through which the relative 'goodness' of organizational actions can be evaluated culturally but they also create distinctions between those aspects of practice which should and should not be open to ethical scrutiny.

As we have demonstrated in this article, the configuration of organizational change into a dominant and centred plot leads to a refiguration of the ethical meaning of that change. Moreover, when such a narrative configuration becomes centred and legitimate such that it informs and dominates all acts of storytelling about the changes, the refiguration also becomes stultified into a commonly accepted and repeated morality. The process of narrative closure leads to a disposition to accept that the questions and problems that prefigure the narrative are answered and solved by it (Carroll, 2007). There are important implications to this for the process of moral reasoning in organizations. Indeed, if ethics itself be regarded as a matter of ongoing questioning of the structure of meaning that shape and rule our lives (Scott, 1990), then the narrative closure that characterizes dominant and legitimated organizational narratives is best understood as an anathema to organizational ethics. It is here that we can surmise the relationship between storytelling, change, power and ethics in organizations – when narratives of organizational change become dominated by an organizationally legitimated plot, the narrative serves to close down the openness required by ethics.

Notes

[1] The name V-Tech is a pseudonym that we are employing so as to preserve the anonymity of the organization where the research was conducted. Similarly, the names of the employees that we use in the article are also pseudonyms.

[2] Ricoeur (1984) refers to these operations formally as mimesis$_1$, mimesis$_2$ and mimesis$_3$, while also using the terms prefiguration, configuration, refiguration. In this article we have adopted the latter, and more descriptive, terminology.

[3] We have kept company and industry details purposefully vague to further protect the anonymity of the organization. We too note that these details are not essential for the purpose of our narrative analysis.

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