CHAPTER 5

STORIES

Peter Simpson

OVERVIEW

- **Stories as central to sense-making processes in organisations**
- **Underlying principles and theory**
- **Methods of eliciting stories – the interview, group work**
- **Working with the data – two case studies: analysing the structure of stories, working with paradox**
- **Conclusion**
- **Discussion questions**
- **Further reading**

The following is a brief excerpt from a research interview with Nicholas, the lead negotiator in a large Western multinational. Nicholas is in the middle of a story about the early stages of an international joint venture, and, as you will see at this point, things were not going well:

Nicholas: 'the Russian negotiator was being particularly stubborn and I said, 'Mikhail this is ridiculous'. He looked at me and said, 'What do you know …?'
Researcher [interrupting :] 'Ouch!'
Nicholas: 'Yes, Ouch! 'What do you know? You know nothing. You don't know me, and you don't know these people – me and the Chinese. I do.' And he was right. I suddenly realised, 'I don't know you, obviously, and I don't know the Chinese, obviously.' Because he had years of experience, he had even been out there with them on aid programmes, as had the translator it turned out. But there was an anger in him there, it showed in his

eyes, a real anger, and I thought I had really blown that one. So I stopped my tirade with him at that point and just backed off, and left it'.

The beauty of such a story for the researcher is that it captures an organisational experience with such richness of feeling and detail − a reality if you like − that can be seen in the interview and felt, even in reading the text. The experience is relived in retelling the story. The audience is allowed to experience it vicariously.

In research terms, this provides data that are particularly appropriate for the investigation of experiential phenomena. Contrast this with, for example, the sort of response that might be obtained if the negotiator was asked to complete a questionnaire or to 'outline the five most important elements of a successful negotiation in an international joint venture'. Karl Weick (1979) makes a similar contrast between the study of a fish, preserved and mounted and amenable to observation, with one on the end of a line, fighting for its life as the fisherman seeks to land it. The former provides observational data, the second experiential data.

In this chapter we are going to explore the practice of using stories in organisational and management research. Our starting point is that stories are central to processes of sense-making within organisations. Boje described storytelling as 'the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships' (Boje, 1991, p. 106). As a result, most people learn the art of storytelling, and the researcher of stories will not find it hard to gain access to good data. Provided that she or he does not ask questions in a 'factual' way, but rather gives people opportunities to 'talk normally' about the interesting aspects of research participants' experience, people will readily provide stories.

What we do in this chapter is to explore some research methods that can help to elicit stories. However, before we do, we think it only fair to let you know what happened to poor Nicholas. Had he really blown it? Would Mikhail ever forgive him? Would the joint venture fail? The story has not yet ended (so even we do not know whether the joint venture will finally succeed), but it did continue, and something changed:

> I don't know where along the line that it happened. He [the Russian negotiator] had a birthday dinner one night in Beijing. I got there late and when I arrived he had saved a place for me at the table next to him. All the heads of the delegations were at his birthday dinner, and he stood up and just gave this toast, 'And Nicholas, he's my best friend. I know that whenever there's a fight he's going to be standing right there behind me. That's what I know'.

UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES AND THEORY

The use of stories in organisational research has its origins in two literatures − the first on folklore, anthropology and myth, and the second in narrative analysis.

In the first, the focus of attention is upon stories that take on the quality of a 'myth', which persist within a particular culture and are told and retold time and time again. Such stories will be told at particular times, such as the induction of new staff, or in critical moments

when the story provides some sort of explanation for the situation. While such stories persist because they embody something of general significance, it is important to recognise that the meaning of such stories will also change with the intentions of the teller and the listeners, and in relation to events that are unfolding. Consequently, research drawing upon this literature will tend to give attention to the meaning of a story in relation to the particular event.

The work of Levi-Strauss (1963) has been particularly influential in organisational research from an anthropological approach. The importance of mythical stories is their capacity to contribute to the resolution of life contradictions, with stories at an unconscious level helping individuals to bring order and understanding to their experience. In recent decades, the increasing attention given to change and uncertainty has led studies to draw upon the mythical quality of organisational stories in this sense-making process. We can see this in the mainstream culture-change literature (for example, Peters and Waterman, 1982) as well as the more academic studies of story and myth in the leadership of change (for example, Mitroff and Kilmann, 1975). A research design adopting such an approach will tend to focus on gathering stories that are frequently retold and play a particular role within an organisational culture (for an outline of such an approach see Gabriel, 1999, pp. 270–272). However, our focus here is on gathering stories that are constructed by the research participant as a part of the process of sense-making in the moment, as the storyteller works actively with the researcher. Such an approach draws more heavily on the second body of literature from which organisational research into stories has developed – narrative analysis.

Narrative analysis (see, for example, Labov and Waletzky, 1967; Labov, 1972; Bruner, 1990; Cortazzi, 1993; Riessman, 1993; Czarniawska, 1998, 1999) is concerned with the interpretation of communications, paying particular attention to a critique of the coherence and fidelity of the narrative, and with an emphasis on links with values, reasons, decisions and actions. Stories play a particular role in narrative analysis to the extent that they contribute to the continual creation and re-creation of our understanding of our place in the world. The important stories, from this perspective, are not those that exist and persist within a culture, but are our own stories and those that we are involved in creating with others.

Stories formed in everyday conversation, which may include those generated in research processes, are directly linked to the experience of organisational members and their desire to account for and make sense of their lives. Such stories are more personal, more immediate, and will tend to be told relatively infrequently, having a currency for a time but then being replaced by more recent stories that are relevant to current experience. Our focus with this form of story is on the manner in which individuals use narrative forms to work with their unfolding values and reasons, and subsequently to make decisions and take action.

The process of describing and working with experience in storied form is not without its complications – not least because words are not experience. As a researcher of such stories, we must therefore give attention both to the characteristics of the experience being described and to the nature of the language being employed. Extremely helpful in this

regard is Clandinin and Connelly's understanding of stories as a 'middle ground' between experiences and the discourses (the body of language and meanings) that are available within a particular culture. They suggested that when people think and talk about their experience they do so in 'storied form', and they do not just record experience over time. Thus, a story has 'a sense of being full, a sense of coming out of a personal and social history' (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994, p. 415).

The challenge, from this perspective, is to adopt a research approach that will encourage research participants to tell stories that genuinely reflect their values and reasons, making sense of their decisions and actions. It is to this task of eliciting data in storied form that we now turn.

METHODS OF ELICITING STORIES

There are many ways to elicit stories from research participants. The most common is the interview, but there are many other approaches that may be adopted that can lead to rich and interesting data. We will first consider the interview method, and then look at a group-based method. In all cases, wherever possible, we record and then transcribe the conversations.

The interview

It is important to distinguish between different approaches to the interview, which can be used to meet different purposes, seeking different forms of data. Gabriel (2000) suggests that:

> it is necessary to distinguish between description, which deals with facts-as-information, and stories, which represent facts-as-experience…
>
> (Gabriel, 2000, p. 27)

The positivist approach to the research interview seeks to elicit 'facts-as-information'. The interviewer may, for example, ask for biographical details, or even specific questions about beliefs, feelings, motives, reasons or behaviour. The aim of such an interview is to generate data which will be valid as knowledge independent of both the research setting and the researcher or interviewer. For this reason, such interviews tend to be tightly structured, asking the same questions in the same sequence in the same manner.

In seeking to research data in the form of stories – 'facts-as-experience' – we might apply some of these principles to the interview, but our general approach will be quite different. For example, we tend to use storied data to investigate particular themes, and so will have a semi-structured interview approach designed to elicit particular types of story (e.g. 'your darkest moment as a leader' or 'a situation where you did not know what you were doing'). We have also found it helpful to seek some contextual information (e.g. a brief career history) as 'factual' material within which to locate the analysis of the stories. Jenni's case study gives a good insight into this approach.

A PhD student's story – Jenni

I stumbled into the use of stories in my research. I didn't make a conscious decision to elicit stories – the interviewees just gave them to me, and when I started looking at the transcripts I was really struck by the number of stories that the interviewees told me. I think the reason that I got so many stories was the exploratory nature of the interviews, which were partially directive, and used only one main question: 'what is your emotional experience of remote working?'

As the interviewer, I worked throughout the interview at actively listening for emergent themes, and then asked the participant to 'tell me more about …' This approach allowed the interviewee to say what they wanted to in relation to the research topic in a way that they wanted to say it. Informal post-interview feedback that I have received from interviewees is that they likened the interview experience to having a counselling session, after which they felt 'less stressed' about their job.

The nature of asking people to talk about their experiences is explicitly linked to their feelings and emotions. Thus, the interview has the potential to turn into a quasi-counselling session, especially when people use a story as a way of voicing an emotive view and reliving an experience that they may perceive as negative. Although the use of open-ended questions allowed access to a mass of rich data, I found I had to work very hard at ensuring that I didn't 'open up a can of worms' and leave the interviewee troubled by themes explored in the interview process.

The stories that the interviewees handed to me in this piece of research added a real richness and depth to the data. Some of the stories were scene-setting, and allowed me a context in which to understand what the interviewee was trying to tell me. Other stories were used to highlight or make a point about the research topic; most were historical. However, one was very recent and obviously still uppermost in the interviewee's mind and emotional realm. It was here that I had to consider the interviewee's emotional welfare over and above the merits of gaining data for research, so I allowed the interviewee to tell me what she wanted to but didn't probe in depth into an obviously emotionally difficult story.

Within a loosely containing structure, which may bear some similarities to an interview that is seeking 'facts-as-information', our primary purpose is to elicit authentic accounts of subjective experience, and our practice is generally to move beyond 'asking questions' and seek to reach a state of 'engaging in conversation'. As an interviewer, a successful interview will involve becoming lost in the conversation, fully engaged – not somehow 'detached' as 'researcher'. At times, in the role of interviewer, one becomes aware of the need to reflect on such things as the time or whether other questions need to be asked. Provided, however, that one is clear on the purpose of the interview and that this has been adequately understood by the interviewee, little overt effort needs

to be given to such issues, other than the normal processes of active listening (Rutter, 2003).

For example, as a group of colleagues we are currently engaged in a long-term project investigating 'what leaders do'. In these interviews we begin by requesting a brief career history, focusing on 'key moments' or events, and then focus on eliciting stories on our theme by asking about what they have done in 'good' and 'bad' times. In this design we are employing a version of the 'critical incident technique' (Chell, 2004), which can lead to very rich stories, because the 'critical' nature of the experience means that interviewees tend to have vivid recall of both events and emotions.

The interviews tend to last between 45 and 90 minutes, although they are sometimes longer, depending upon the time available and the desire of the interviewee to talk. We use an interview structure, outlining possible questions (Figure 5.1), which is sent to the interviewee prior to the interview. The focus is on the first three elements – career history,

---

Leadership interviews: question planning

This is a selection of potential questions and areas for exploration. Not all of these are to be used.

- **Career history**
  Please can you provide us with a brief overview of your career history?

- **Events and situations**
  What were the most perilous moments in your career?
  – how did you sense the danger?
  Can you think of a situation in which your back was up against the wall?
  – what did it feel like?
  – what were the consequences for other people?
  What are the three biggest successes of your career?
  – can we focus on one of these?
  What are the three most memorable events in your business career?
  – can we focus on one of these?

- **Personal characteristics**
  What are your strengths and weaknesses?

- **Leadership**
  What are the most difficult and/or challenging aspects of leadership?
  What do you enjoy most about leadership?

- **Philosophy**
  Do you have what you might call a 'philosophy of business'?
  What are your core business values?

- **People**
  Who have been the key people working with you?
  What is it about these people that you really valued?
  Have there been any individuals who have had a particularly formative impact on your understanding of leadership?

Figure 5.1 Outline of Possible Interview Questions

successes and tough times. The other questions are really there only as an *aide-mémoire* of questions and themes that we have found relevant in the past – issues that may be worth pursuing in the conversation as it develops. Once the early stages of the interview are passed, and the interviewee understands that the requirement is for a factual biographical account leading on to a series of stories about particular experiences, the interview structure can be left behind. As interviewer, it is important to have a clear enough sense of the issues worth pursuing, so that any notes or pieces of paper can be put aside to allow the conversation to take its course.

The intention is to allow the interviewee to enter that state of mind in which sense-making is taking place: we are not looking for 'packaged' memories or 'interesting stories', but to access the experience of the interviewee as fully as possible. The attention of the researcher and the interviewee must be – as fully as possible – on the experience itself. The interviewee should be allowed to experience the time again, to relive it in the retelling of the story. It is evident that inappropriate or overly frequent questions, or too much direction, from the researcher will prevent the teller from reaching this state. The researcher merely seeks to communicate genuine interest in the experience. For example, in the story excerpt at the beginning of this chapter, when the researcher uttered a spontaneous 'Ouch' in response to hearing about Mikhail's attack upon Nicholas, we see an empathetic entering into the feelings as well as the facts of the story.

Group work on live stories

Another method that we have used successfully to elicit organisational stories involves working with groups on current issues requiring active attention. It works equally well with members from a single organisation or from a range of organisations. This group-based method is a form of action research (Eden and Huxham, 1996) that seeks to address live organisational issues in real time, providing a context within which the participants will gain insight and learning. While we are careful not to suggest that problems will be solved through the process – in fact we set up a process to explicitly avoid this – it is possible to be confident that the participants will find the experience valuable and rewarding.

This approach can increase the chances of gaining access to organisations over a protracted period of time, because it is possible to 'sell' the potential benefits that participants may gain from taking part in the process. This helps to gain a research relationship that allows stories to be explored as they unfold over time. One of the difficulties with the interview approach is that it tends to involve a single engagement with each interviewee, and demands a certain generosity of spirit from the interviewees prepared to give their time, often with little obvious benefit to themselves.

One particular approach that we have used with a number of organisations provides up to six participants with the opportunity to share a specific experience of taking up their leadership role in a 'live' situation within their organisation where they do not know what

to do. In Figure 5.2, a number of the general principles concerning this method are set out. These notes were sent to the participants prior to the first meeting, as part of the negotiation process asking them to take part in the research.

The intention, as with the interviews, is to set up a containing process that allows researcher and participants to enter into real conversations. In order to achieve this, the process must be set up with a level of simplicity and clarity that allows the researcher to manage the process with minimal effort. It is important to ensure that the participants know what is going on at any point and what their role is in the research process. The general principles of the research are introduced and explained:

1. the nature of the *process* (bringing 'live' case studies to be worked on by the group) and the *theme* of the research;
2. the dual aims are outlined, in this case providing an opportunity for participants to 'explore and learn' (probably of greatest interest to the participants) and to conduct a research project (probably of greatest interest to the researcher);
3. clear objectives are articulated that are of value in relation to both of the aims – and therefore of interest to both participants and researcher(s);
4. the way of working is outlined in some detail, clarifying the nature of the commitment being entered into and including the respective roles of participants and researcher(s).

A very important feature of this approach is that group members are encouraged not to attempt to 'solve' the problem, but to make connections to their own experience. The researcher's role as 'facilitator' of this collaborative process is crucial at this stage, because groups tend to enter 'problem-solving' mode. Two features of the approach are generally enough to inhibit this tendency. Firstly, once the 'case' has been presented and questions for clarification answered, the presenter 'sits out' for the first part (10–15 minutes) of the group discussion (in this respect, the reader will notice a parallel process suggested to facilitate a creative dialogue session as discussed in chapter 3, the 'three-maps' dialogue procedure). In combination with this procedure, the researcher reminds the group with a phrase such as: 'the problem does not need to be solved by the group: all we need to do is to make connections with our own experience. In fact, the presenter will probably find this more helpful'.

In making connections to their own experience, group members will offer stories of their own, as well as opinions and beliefs. This provides the researcher with not only the story of the 'difficult situation' offered by the presenter, but also additional data in story form from the other group members. The process is invariably useful and interesting for the group members, with a range of insights and new perspectives being gained from others' experience. The most commonly expressed benefit is the experience of sitting outside of the group, after presenting. This is often difficult – the desire to correct misunderstandings is great – but it is typically enlightening to realise that there are other ways to make sense of the situation being faced.

Explanatory note – group research into leading in difficult situations

This process is intended to provide the opportunity to share a specific experience of taking up your leadership role in a difficult situation within your organisation.

Aim

To offer the members of the members of the Research Group the opportunity to explore and learn from their shared and different perceptions and experiences of working in role in the context of this leadership research project.

Objectives
To enable us to:

• gain insight into relationships and patterns of behaviour in situations of uncertainty;
• explore the ways in which personal thoughts and feelings can be managed in a leadership setting;
• explore strategies which might increase effectiveness in leadership roles.

The way of working

We will meet five times, on a monthly basis. Sessions will be two hours long. The basic material for sessions 2, 3 and 4 will be provided by case-study material based on the experience of two members of the Research Group taking up a leadership role in a difficult situation. In session 1, we will agree the sessions at which different participants will make their presentations. In session 5, we will review our insights and learning from the process.

By 'case study', we mean some kind of event, incident or situation that is facing you at work. It could be a recurrent problem or a one-off; it might be a 30-second interaction or involve a long-standing working relationship; it could be a clearly identifiable issue or one 'event' or meeting that left you feeling confused; it might involve several others or one person, and they might be at any level or any part of the organisation.

In preparing your 'presentation', you should think of a specific case – rather than something general, like 'managing people' – and it should be current – in other words something on which you will have to take action. This is not intended as a competition to see who can do the best presentation or prove that they are coping better than anyone else! Instead, the 'presentation' can be as structured/unstructured as you wish – and should in any case only last five to 10 minutes. It will help to choose an incident, event or situation that has aspects which are puzzling to you – either in how you find yourself reacting or in how other people behave – and where you feel that you need to understand more about what is going on before you can act.

The research project leader will manage the process. Each case study will have 45 minutes, to cover:

(1) brief presentation, followed by questions for clarification only (5–10 minutes);
(2) time for the presenter to sit back and listen, while the rest of us talk through what we think may be going on, in terms of the role of the presenter (15–20 minutes);
(3) time for the presenter to join in the discussion (15–20 minutes).

At the end of each session we will leave time for all of us to see whether there are any patterns emerging about the experience of the leadership role.

Figure 5.2 An Example of Eliciting Organisational Stories in a Group Setting

WORKING WITH THE DATA

Interpreting and analysing data in storied form can be challenging. For example, while we are seeking stories that somehow represent the reality of the storyteller's experience, this is clearly not 'reality' as it is understood in common usage – the story is not 'factual information'. It is a construction, based on a memory of a recent or distant experience. In chapter 1 we noted the possibility that organisational members may rely on self-presentation routines that are based in their competence and expertise (Marcic, 2002). Even where it is based on a 'real experience', we must ask questions about how it is constructed. Even if our research participants 'tell it as it is', we must take into account the fact that they are constrained in the telling by the words and language that are available – the constructed story may use the building blocks of experience, but these are shaped with the tools of discourse that are available to the storyteller. They will also have their own perspective and bias, which will have constrained and influenced their experiences as much as they affect the telling of the story.

In addition, we are faced with a series of problems or challenges when we work with stories. For example, what was our purpose in telling you the story right at the beginning of the chapter? Was it to communicate 'a reality'? Or was it to engage, even seduce, you – to make you suspend your critical faculties and believe us just because we can tell a good story? Or was it narcissistic – just a bit of showing off? These are valid and important questions that you might bear in mind whenever you approach the analysis of the stories that you have gathered. The reason for this is that good stories are effective at doing all of these things.

In a similar vein, Gabriel brings our attention to the role of 'poetic licence', suggesting that storytelling enables the organisational member to express views that may be difficult or dangerous to voice directly. He suggests that such stories, being emotionally and symbolically charged narratives, do not merely represent information or facts about 'events'. Stories enrich and enhance facts, often compromising accuracy, and containing inconsistencies, illogicalities and ambiguities. Ultimately, Gabriel argues, the truth of a story lies not in its accuracy but in its meaning (Gabriel, 1999, p. 271)

All of these questions challenge the extent to which stories are providing us with an accurate and reliable source of data about organisational experience. This serves as a caution to the researcher to retain a healthy degree of suspicion concerning the extent to which the storyteller may change the story in the moment, for dramatic purposes. The telling of stories will always have this dimension, because of the nature of the medium and the process of social interaction. This becomes a matter of judgement for the researcher, but this judgement does not need to be made in a vacuum – there are certain principles that may be applied.

We can judge stories by evaluating narrative probability and narrative fidelity. *Narrative probability* is the coherence of the story: the extent to which it is free of contradictions, both internally and when compared to other stories, and is in keeping with the known characteristics of the individuals involved. *Narrative fidelity* concerns how well the story corresponds with experience, presenting good reasons for what happens, based on history, culture and biography, and so reflects the truth (Weick and Browning, 1986).

In learning to analyse the transcripts of stories, the organisational researcher needs to develop a capacity to make appropriate judgements in these matters. This is assisted by wider reading, as suggested in the discussion above of underlying theory. Nothing will tell us the 'best way' to analyse the stories we gather – as we suggested in chapter 2, we must learn the art of the *bricoleur*, to play around with data. There are a vast array of ideas in some of the seminal texts on the analysis of qualitative data, for example Silverman (2001). In this way we practice analysis with a thoughtful awareness of the medium with which we work, gaining ideas from others about interesting approaches that might yield appropriate insights. The following two case studies present examples of this.

Case study 1: analysing the structure of stories

The first case study of working with data in storied form analyses the structure of a single story derived from an interview on 'what leaders do'. This is an example of using a framework from the literature to develop insights. This initial analysis began as a bit of 'playing around', but came to form the basis for the analysis of a series of interviews for similar ideas and themes.

Labov (1972) provides us with a framework for analysing the structure of stories. Labov suggests that there are five elements in a complete story: abstract, orientation, complication, evaluation and result. The following story, taken from the beginning of an interview with a very successful entrepreneur, was subjected to an initial analysis using this framework. This story is presented exactly as it was spoken and then recorded in the transcript. It just so happened that this matched Labov's framework precisely. It should be noted that this is not always the case. This is the story, broken into its component parts:

Abstract: I don't really like the concept of leadership.

Orientation: In fact, when I created the course at [the university], although it's called LIES [Leadership, Innovation and Enterprise], it was really about innovation and enterprise, we just threw in leadership to make it respectable.

Complication: Why I don't like it is if you know where you are going people are just likely to follow.

Evaluation: What matters is the enthusiasm needed to carry them along, and, if you are employing people, the power that goes with it: the guy that pays the wages is a great leader! You can confuse the giving of rewards with leadership.

Result: I think much more about people than I do about leadership. If you promised me a million pounds to name the people who work for our suppliers or our customers, I doubt that I could. But I can name the directors, the managers, the graduates and so on who work for us. Without going over the top, they need to know you care, that you recognise they have needs, that you are concerned.

Continued

The *abstract* introduces us to the theme of the narrative – and, as it turns out, to the key theme of the whole interview. With the *orientation*, he lays out the basic setting for this short narrative – the creation of the course and its name. The *complication* is signalled by the phrase 'Why I don't like it is …' In this case, the complication turns on its head the dominant image of the leader as 'prime mover'. The *evaluation* too has a linguistic 'marker' in the phrase, 'What matters is …' He tells us that you simply do not need this monolithic 'thing' – 'leadership' – because quite ordinary things are enough; here he specifically names relationships with others and organisational power. The *result* is not an extended discussion. In picking up some of the themes of the narrative, he simply tells us: as a result, this is what I do.

Our purpose was to identify 'rounded and full' (rather than 'partial and incomplete') stories in the text of an interview that lasted 90 minutes. The unexpected consequence, however, was that in slowing down and reflecting carefully upon the structure of the story we noticed some very unusual features in the arguments being made. In particular, we noticed the deconstruction of the notion of leadership by a leader who was being interviewed about 'what leaders do'. This then formed the basis of a content analysis of the rest of the interview, and indeed of other interviews in the series (French and Simpson, 2006).

Case study 2: playing around with themes or theories

The second illustration of working with data in storied form is the analysis of a section of the transcript from a group research project on 'difficult situations'. It demonstrates how, *once one discovers a theme or theoretical notion*, it is possible to *play around* with stories and interpretations to develop an argument. The theme, in this case, is that of paradox (Stacey, 2003).

This concerns a story told by Trevor, a parish curate who had a hostile working relationship with the Liaison Officer for those in the community with disabilities. Previously a social worker specialising in working with the disabled, Trevor had been asked by the Archdeacon to 'manage' this Officer, whose competency to perform the role was in doubt. The Liaison Officer was herself disabled and had recently been off work for a number of months following a family bereavement.

Trevor had agreed to take on this additional responsibility. Perhaps expecting gratitude at his willingness to volunteer, he was angered by the hostility and criticism that was directed at him by the Liaison Officer. The situation seemed impossible. During the

Continued

discussion, one member of the research group, identified the need to work with a paradox:

> The Liaison Officer is in that job whether Trevor thinks she's right or not, and she's got the support and authority that comes from the Bishop and the Archdeacon, and she's been there for two years or so. It's very difficult. I've not had a lot to do with the disabled, but it is very difficult for able-bodied people to understand where they are coming from. The fact that she hasn't got high self-esteem and in some ways does not seem terribly competent may actually be a huge gift to the disabled community, because that's actually where they are coming from.

The paradox has two elements. Firstly, that Trevor had taken on responsibility to manage a situation, but did not have the authority to manage it in the way that appeared to him necessary (the replacement of the Officer). The challenge of responsibility without authority is a common issue that requires the leader to engage with a paradox: what is known to be possible is not possible because it is not allowed. Secondly, certain aspects of the incompetence of the Officer might be central to the Officer's competence to perform the role.

At the subsequent meeting of the research group, Trevor reported that, in the event, he had done nothing – but waited for something to happen. That something was a conciliatory move on the part of the Officer, saying that 'she realised that they needed to meet up'. Trevor's reaction was that this move could be used 'as a strength rather than a weakness':

> We talked a lot last time about the weaknesses of this person. The strength, for her and for me, is that she has not just flounced off and given her notice in, which would be detrimental at this time to the diocese. The fact that she is wanting things to work is quite encouraging.

Engaging with paradox requires a preparedness to meet on both sides. Waiting and doing nothing allowed the Liaison Officer to take the initiative. The positive outcome of this reminded Trevor of his social work training:

> Often you could see a situation in a private home where they clearly needed to move on to a residential nursing home or a mental health hospital, but they weren't ready to do that. I won't say it was *always* easy, but *on the whole* it was easy to walk back to Social Services and just write on the file, 'Waiting for this person to fall' … [Eventually] you would get a phone call either from them or from a relative to say, 'Actually I need to go'. If I had gone in and said you need to do this, that and the other it probably would have failed. Sometimes that can take 18 months, but it happened eventually.

Continued

> As well as re-learning an old lesson, Trevor noted the emergence of some self-knowledge:
>
> > The thing that has struck me since … listening to what everybody was saying, is that I don't suffer fools gladly. I'm more conscious of that now than I was and it's not how I work with a fool – I don't mean that – but how I work with somebody who doesn't come up to the same expectations that I have …
>
> These expectations of others, this knowledge of how competent the Officer should be, made it difficult for Trevor to work with the paradoxes of leading without authority and the potential competence of incompetence. However, the lack of a possible resolution, and the research process itself, compelled him to persist with this experience of not knowing.

CONCLUSION

Stories are one of the most common ways that people communicate and work with their experience. While stories are often told because they are interesting and engaging, they do much more than this. They are an essential component in the sense-making process – they can be used in problem-solving, socialisation, learning and other important aspects of organisational life. This means that stories can be an enormously rich and plentiful source of data for the organisational researcher. As a medium for research, stories are relatively easy to work with, with well-formed and coherent texts providing reasons and interpretations that can be worked with in the development of your research writing.

There is a great deal of research that has already been done in the area. This is helpful, but it does mean that there are many ways in which it is possible to use stories in research. It is important to be clear how you are going to use them in your research. In the Further Reading section we suggest an article by Mary Boyce that provides an excellent critical review of the literature up to the mid-1990s. This is particularly useful for locating and positioning yourself as a researcher, and contains some excellent examples of the ways that stories have been used in research and some challenges to the application of story work to organisations. This will be valuable in helping the researcher to clarify the way in which she or he wants to work with stories and the particular perspectives that are going to be adopted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the important differences between stories that are told and retold within an organisation, and those that are told to you, the research interviewer, perhaps for the first time?

2. How would you determine whether the story being told was true or not? What are the implications for your research if you discover that the story was not factually true?
3. How would you prepare differently for a 'facts-as information' interview and a 'facts-as-experience' interview?
4. What problems might you encounter when working with a group to elicit stories? In your preparation for the first meeting, what could you do that might help to ameliorate these potential difficulties?
5. What are the main challenges involved in interpreting and analysing the data that emerge from stories?

FURTHER READING

This book is concerned with methods of research that give attention to the social construction of reality and the development of a critical understanding of these realities. The 1996 article by Mary Boyce adopts this perspective, and so provides a very helpful overview of core ideas and literature on organisational stories and storytelling. For a more extended example of the practice of researching stories in organisations, Yiannis Gabriel's book is excellent. Finally, the task of interpreting your data will require some attention: David Silverman's guidance will be invaluable.

Boyce, M.E. (1996) 'Organizational Story and Storytelling: A Critical Review', *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, Vol. 9, No. 5: 5–26

Gabriel, Y. (2000) *Storytelling in Organizations. Facts, Fictions and Fantasies,* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Silverman, D. (2001) *Interpreting Qualitative Data − Methods for Analysing Talk, Texts and Interaction*, London: Sage Publications