

**KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER THROUGH
NARRATIVES IN AN ORGANIZATION:**

**A Study of a Nonprofit Social Service Agency's
Collective Assignment of Meaning**

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**Knowledge Transfer Through Narratives in an Organization:
A Study of a Nonprofit Social Service Agency's
Collective Assignment of Meaning**

Susana Dinkins Limon

(Abstract)

This dissertation looks at the role narratives play in addressing organizational challenges by facilitating a collective assignment of meaning to those challenges that allows for problem solving, or at least a way to cope with the challenges. Specifically, the research examines the role of narratives in the transfer of knowledge to address organizational challenges. The dissertation develops the concept of narrative, and the qualities of the narratives used in this dissertation, focused on events, focused on people, focused on values, and it develops an understanding of knowledge transfer as the collective assignment of meaning to three organizational challenges that are constantly emerging.

In order to investigate the role that narratives play in knowledge transfer for addressing organizational challenges, two questions were posed and examined. First, can narratives be used as a means to explain knowledge transfer in a social service organization as a collective, interactive process? Second, do narratives create, or

contribute to a “knowledge transfer flow” in the organization that can be observed? An interpretivist approach was adopted and narrative inquiry was applied to the organization to provide a different lens through which organizational challenges are addressed and meaning was assigned to those challenges. The focus on narratives was an effort to see how participants assigned meaning, or made sense of the three challenges.

In this case study, three means, or tools emerge as facilitating the assignment of meaning. These tools are superstars, indexing, and knowledge objects. This research will enrich the public administration and nonprofit literatures by utilizing narrative inquiry to examine the transfer of knowledge in a nonprofit social service organization that serves a vital public purpose under contracts with various levels of government. The research shows that knowledge was transferred through the collective assignment of meaning to ongoing organizational challenges that took the form of narratives. The research also shows that a cumulative effect was identified in the organizational narratives, so that as stories were told and retold, the organizational challenges took on new meanings, and people were able to take these new meanings to help them deal with the challenges.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In the new knowledge economy, the ability to obtain, manage, share, and retain information directly impacts an organization's effectiveness. Many organizations today are employing "chief knowledge officers" to fulfill these functions. With this economy comes a new language, with terms such as "communities of practice," "portals" and "self-directed learners." This dissertation focuses on the transfer of knowledge across an organization and the use of that knowledge to deal with continuously emerging organizational challenges. Many organizations call the transfer of useful knowledge applied successfully elsewhere "Best Practices" or "Lessons Learned," and these terms are the modern form of the ancient art of storytelling.

This dissertation looks at the role narratives play in addressing organizational challenges by facilitating a collective assignment of meaning to those challenges that allows for problem solving, or at least a way to cope with the challenges. The dissertation develops the concept of narrative, and the qualities of the narratives used in this dissertation, focused on events, focused on people, focused on values, and it develops an

understanding of knowledge transfer as the collective assignment of meaning to challenges that are constantly emerging.

The examination of knowledge transfer in a social service organization revealed tools that assisted in the use of narratives as a means to assign meaning and transfer knowledge—superstars, indexing, and knowledge objects. The “superstars” in the organization are individuals who were highly regarded in the organization, whose stories take on greater weight and emphasis, and who are mentioned frequently by various persons as “the person to talk to.” These tend to be people who help you, who know the “short cuts.” Part of their approachability is their “open door,” and their deep conviction. The “indexing” tool allows individuals in an organization to “categorize” or “script” pieces of data and information so that these can fall into patterns that make sense to them. Indexes provide the “signposts” for an organization to help direct the questions or issues. The last tool used revolved around the function of “knowledge objects.” These are materials that can be found within the organization that often are overlooked, but serve as “valuable knowledge objects” for morale, motivation, community building, and knowledge transfer. These tools are used in an organization to facilitate the assignment of meaning by passing on, and giving, definition to the stories that circulate within the organization.

Information becomes knowledge when it is placed in context and creates a capacity to act (Davenport & Prusak, 2000). The knowledge I am interested in for this research is that which is established collectively or socially through practice, and I will describe one way that information is turned to knowledge in the organization studied here, and is transferred across that organization. The continuous processing of data,

information, stories, and anecdotes, facilitates the assignment of meaning and knowledge transfer across an organization. To simplify this description, information becomes knowledge as meaning is assigned and embedded. This can be done at the individual level, but my research focused on the collective assignment of meaning, and how this is used to transfer organizational knowledge. The use of narratives to transfer knowledge is one way that organizations transfer knowledge. My research will not look at all the various ways that knowledge is transferred, nor will it make an evaluative assertion as to whether narratives are more effective at knowledge transfer than other means.

Organizations are complex, multi-dimensional systems that have been studied frequently in the literature using a positivist approach (March & Simon,1958; Thompson & Tuden,1959). However, by using an interpretivist paradigm, applying a narrative inquiry approach to an organization, I provide a different lens through which organizational challenges can be addressed. Experiences are filtered through our existing knowledge and beliefs, and the knowledge and beliefs constitute how we construct meanings from our experiences. The broad question to be addressed in my dissertation is: “What is the role that narratives play in knowledge transfer for addressing organizational challenges?” In order to answer this question, two research questions were posed and examined. First, can narratives be used as a means to explain knowledge transfer in a social service organization as a collective, interactive process? Second, do narratives create, or contribute to a “knowledge transfer flow” in the organization that can be observed?

1.2 Background

The research question will be examined using a case study approach, grounded in ethnomethodology. The application of this methodology has generated a model that represents the way members of the social service organization utilize narratives to make sense of and address three continuously emerging challenges for the organization (Weick, 1995). This understanding of how one organization utilizes narratives could provide a model for examining knowledge, and knowledge transfer, in organizations providing a public service. Early researchers studying knowledge often subscribed to the dominant philosophical view of mind, learning, and knowledge, as ‘egocentric,’ focusing on the individual, and how one acquired true knowledge of the world external to oneself. An alternative view, and the one I will use in this dissertation, is ‘sociocentric,’ still considering the individual and the world, but also taking into account the cultural nature of knowledge as a common human construction that is both formed by and forms human beings. For my research, knowledge is information that has meaning and guides the organization. It is collectively assigned meaning, and this meaning cannot be disconnected from action (Yanow, 2000).

The sociocentric, or community, model assumes a community approach to knowledge transfer. The model assumes that “learning occurs, and knowledge is created, mainly through conversations and interactions *between* people” so that learners are conceived as “social beings who construct their understanding and learn from social interaction within specific socio-cultural and material settings” (Easterby-Smith et al., 2000).

There is interconnectedness between learning, knowing, and teaching, and each of these is affected by the day-to-day operations of an organization. The aim of narrative inquiry is to make explicit the operations that produce meanings, and to draw out the implications these meanings have for understanding human existence (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives are the primary way that we human beings organize our experiences into meaningful episodes (Schank, 1990).

My definition for “narratives” is anything told or recounted; more narrowly, it is something told or recounted in the form of a causally-linked set of events, and it can be the telling of a happening or connected series of happenings. I will use “narratives” and “stories” interchangeably. A narrative provides an internal structure and thematic organization. For purposes of discussion, stories will include the telling of events, people, and values that were recounted in the interviews. I will reserve the term “narratives” as they relate to the common, or mature themes, or challenges within the organization. These narratives are those that address the broader level themes in the organization, that are seen as ongoing and recurring, and that have importance at all levels of the organization.

I will be using a “narrative inquiry” approach, which is a research technique that emphasizes the stories people tell, and how these stories are communicated. The heart of narrative inquiry is the way humans experience the world. My discussion of “knowledge” means a form of knowing that is inseparable from action, since it is constituted through such action. One of the views of “organizational knowing” means that the capabilities of the organization are constituted every day in the ongoing narratives and situated practices of the organization (Orlikowski, 2002). Knowledge is

transferred when meaning is assigned to narratives, and that knowledge can be constituted through action. In this dissertation, I will use the term “embedded knowledge” to mean informal knowledge that is gained contextually, and can be gained through experiences, internalization, through common practices, and through telling of history or tradition. Although each of these terms has a cultural component, and the cultural aspects are embedded throughout this research, my interest is on the storytelling component of the organization, knowing that stories are a part of the organization’s culture.

1.3 Research Questions

I am interested in the role narratives play in the transfer of knowledge within organizations. Narrative inquiry has been applied to examine a wide range of organizations and activities (Feldman, 2002; Bennett & Feldman, 1981; Boje, 1991; Bruner, 1990; Gee, 1986; and Riessman, 1993). It has not, however, been utilized as extensively in the field of public administration, nor in the nonprofit literature. This research will follow an organization’s common narratives to identify how these narratives are used and transferred across the organization. The narratives that I followed were collectively told across the organization, and the knowledge that was contained in the narratives was transferred, as meaning was collectively assigned to the narratives. My research built upon an understanding of knowledge as embedded and situated. The research will look at the way meanings are derived through narratives, and how stories and their meanings are assigned and used in an organization, and as meaning is assigned, information becomes knowledge.

By using an ethnographic approach, I will follow narratives as empirical phenomena, and will use narrative inquiry to understand the role these narratives play. More specifically, I am interested in seeing the role these narratives play in knowledge transfer within the organization. The broad question to be addressed in my dissertation is: “What is the role that narratives play in knowledge transfer for addressing organizational challenges?” In order to answer this question, two research questions were posed and examined:

- First, can narratives be used as a means to explain knowledge transfer in a social service organization as a collective, interactive process?
- Second, do narratives create, or contribute to a “knowledge transfer flow” in the organization that can be observed?

This research is specifically focused on embedded knowledge transfer. It will not address related issues of knowledge acquisition and creation, knowledge retention, knowledge used for strategic planning, or the role culture plays in knowledge transfer.

1.4 Knowledge Transfer Model

A model of knowledge transfer emerges from this research. The model of knowledge transfer developed in this research focuses on the telling, hearing, and retelling of narratives or stories as the primary means of transfer. These narratives can be categorized using the template provided by Schwartzman (1993): stories about *events* (especially historical events), stories about *individuals*, and stories that illustrate or invoke a particular *value*. There are stories about individuals, events and values,

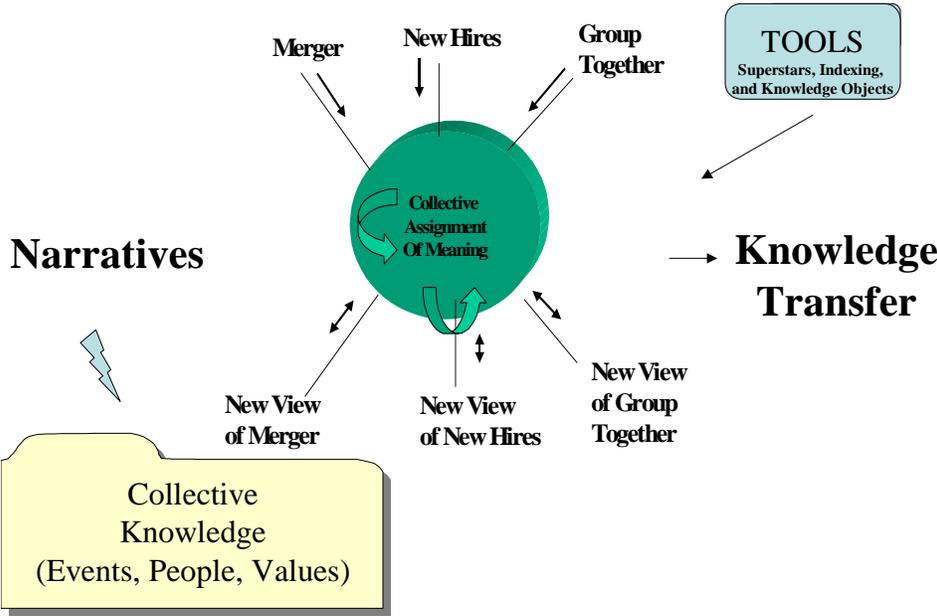
circulating throughout an organization, each with a particular substantive focus or point of reference. Some of these stories are more developed than others, and some of the stories were picked up and retold as a means to contribute to the more developed narratives. As these narratives are repeated throughout the organization, they are collectively assigned meaning by the members.

I was interested in finding key narratives that revealed organizational challenges. In my data collection, three main focused narratives were told and retold. These common stories or narratives included: 1) the challenge of merging into one large organization out of four smaller ones; 2) the challenge of bringing new people into the organization; and 3) the challenge of bringing the newly merged organization all together at one time. In the remainder of this dissertation, these ongoing narratives will be referred to as the “organization’s challenges.” Although these challenges were presented in different ways by the interviewees, each was determined to be a major organizational challenge by the multiple iterations of the stories told about the challenges, and the evolutionary nature of the challenges as something dynamic and ongoing within the organization.

Although these were not the only challenges revealed through the research, these three, and stories related to portions of these three, became the major ones that were repeated and elaborated on by persons at all levels of the organization. In order to gradually assign meaning to the challenges through story telling, certain tools were used extensively. These tools included a reliance on the organization’s “superstars,” the use of “indexing”, and the use of “knowledge objects.” The “superstars” influence the kinds and types of stories that enter the “traffic circles;” the “indexes” allow the stories to be

categorized based on topic; and the “knowledge objects” provide the emphasis needed within the circle for the stories to continue circulating, or to move out in a different direction. Narratives were passed on, each time adding significance, meaning, and fostering the collective assignment of meaning, and the transfer of knowledge. The emergent model is illustrated below:

FIGURE ONE: Knowledge Transfer Model



The three organizational challenges included above are sources of anxiety and ambiguity in the organization. As many interviewees told stories about the challenges,

directly or indirectly, the growing narrative in the organization revolved around how each of these challenges was being addressed. In looking at the model, the focus point, or point of intersection, is where the stories come together in what I will later term the “traffic circles,” so that as stories are told and retold, the participants begin to collectively assign meaning to these stories, and then, as they move away from a “traffic circle,” they have a new view of the challenge that helps them cope with, or have a better understanding of, the tension, and they can then make sense of the organizational challenges. The “traffic circle,” also known as a “roundabout” in the United States, provides an interesting way for an organization to come together and keep moving, without actually having to stop, and this ability to come together with stories, and merge the stories together, develops into a richer understanding of the challenges that are being merged. The retrospective element that is provided by the “traffic circle” allows the organization to cope with its challenges in a more informed and professional manner.

By using the “traffic circle” metaphor, inspired by Gareth Morgan’s *Images of Organization* (1986), I am able to reshape the way we think about knowledge transfer in organizations. The model and the metaphor that are used here were helpful for identifying how this particular organization made sense of their ongoing organizational challenges. This approach could be helpful for another organization to look at how they make sense of their challenges and understand how narratives in the “traffic circle” might facilitate the transfer of collective knowledge. The use of the “traffic circle” metaphor was inspired, in part, from the phrase often used concerning “stories that circulate in our organization.” This notion of stories “circulating” implies a movement and motion to them that was made visible with the model. Morgan emphasizes the use of metaphor as a

way to learn how we can develop and extend our own ability to understand an organization.

It is important to note that the model above illustrates one traffic circle; that does not mean that only one circle is present and active in an organization. It is possible that an organization has many “traffic circles” operating at one time, and may have one centralized circle that is fed by the smaller circles. But the circles do illustrate the importance of “location” and physically being able to participate in a “circle.” Because of the participation of certain persons on various committees in the organization, they have the ability to actively participate in various “traffic circles.” Their “geography” or their “propinquity” allows a more active ability to collectively assign meanings in the traffic circles.

1.5 Literature Link

My research will also take on a new direction for public administration by viewing knowledge transfer as a collective process, not just meaning passed from one individual to another. Though problems of knowledge transfer can be viewed through various paradigmatic lenses, this dissertation will use an interpretivist lens, rather than the positivist or postmodern techniques, for examining knowledge transfer.

Rabinow and Sullivan (1987) describe the interpretive turn as a challenge to the idea that inquiry into the social world, and the value of understanding that results, can actually be determined by methodology. The interpretivist approach considers how meaning is assigned, and I am interested in how the collective assignment of meaning takes place at the organizational level through organizational narratives.

The new public administration heralded the change from a research agenda focused on explanatory accounts to one more focused on interpretation and critique (Waldo, 1984). Many studies attempt to explain or predict certain behaviors. However, Lin (1998) notes that a basic distinction between the positivist and the interpretivist approach to research lies in how each defines “explanation.” For a positivist, an explanation is proven valid by its ability to make predictions. However, for an interpretivist, an explanation can include a discussion of “the how and the why behind the what.”

My theoretical approach to interpretivism includes a vision of people in organizations participating in dynamic changing networks of interaction framed within structural conditions. The interpretivist approach is used to understand how we make sense of our world, and ethnography is one means that can be used to understand how that sensemaking takes place. The social sciences do not just reveal ultimate truths, but they also help us to make sense of our worlds. The benefit of the social sciences is that they offer an explanation to the puzzles in our organizations and socially constructed circles, and they help to clarify and demystify the social forms which institutions create.

The sensemaking that takes place through narratives helps create order and understanding, and helps construct accounts of intended and unintended consequences. This sensemaking is grounded in Karl Weick’s (1995) notion of sensemaking in organizations, or narrative sensemaking. Narratives reflect the importance of ordering of the human experience (Adam, 1990). Narrative inquiry is used to transform everyday events “from the field” into plausible explanations of intent. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to make conclusions, not about certainties, but about the varying perspectives

that can be constructed to make “experience” comprehensible (Bruner, 1986). With narrative inquiry, researchers can look at the processes that people use to make sense of their interactions. These processes include the unique capacity of narrative inquiry to help understand human experiences, and they help illuminate the complexities that come from such an undertaking. This notion of “narrative sensemaking” means that narratives make up the organizing principle that we use for making sense of often chaotic and unorganized work worlds. “Narrative sensemaking thus attests to the pluralization of possible ways that sense can be made. Recognition of this has permitted researchers to study the different ways in which elaborated narratives and narrative fragments are or are not sufficiently consistent and continuous to maintain and objectify reality for participants,” (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, 170).

The sensemaking that occurs as communities come together to negotiate meaning, also takes place as communities construct the meaning of that environment (D’Andrade, 1981; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). By influencing that environment, communities are able to create “life-long learners” and collegial groups that enhance the likelihood of knowledge sharing. This research takes the position that knowledge sharing can occur informally, and will develop an understanding of how this situated and informal incidental knowledge transfer occurs. It will be helpful to understand the characteristics of the organization being studied, and the conditions that promote successful knowledge transfer.

In order to understand how narratives help communities in their sensemaking activities, Robert Schank (1990), in his book *Tell Me a Story*, notes that there are basically five types of narratives: official, invented, firsthand experiential, secondhand,

and culturally common. Each of these types of narratives serves a sensemaking role within organizations. The “official” story originates from an official place, such as a business or government; they are told many times, and are repeated as originally related. An example is an “After Action” report issued by an agency or government office. The “invented” story may embellish on an official story, and this expansion upon the experience often leaves the original experience unrecognizable. The “firsthand story” is told about personal experiences, but may not be told the same way every time; this telling process can be in a highly inventive manner. The “secondhand story” is a more straightforward process than the firsthand stories as one attempts to properly recall the facts that were originally recounted. The “culturally common story” comes to us from our environment; these types of stories tend to be more organic, as no one person tells them and no one person makes them up. My research will follow the culturally common narratives that come from the organizational environment. These culturally common narratives, which I term the organizational challenges, were told to me during the interviews as firsthand and secondhand experiences. The publications that I reviewed provided the “official” narrative of the organization. The culturally common stories are narratives that are known by many people, and are pervasive in the organization. Glover (2004) tells us that stories help us understand ourselves in relation to others. The symbolic expressive elements of an organization are embodied in their narratives, and my research will show the relevance of narrative inquiry to a nonprofit public organization.

1.6 Overview of Dissertation

Chapter 2 provides the literature review for the dissertation. In this chapter, I will discuss knowledge that is present in organizations, how informal knowledge is transferred in organizations, and how the literature uses narrative inquiry. Chapter 3 describes the research design. In this chapter, I will describe focused narratives, describe the case study method, and provide a description of ethnography research.

Chapter 4 provides a description of the agency for this study. The nonprofit organization that I chose to study is located in the Washington, DC area, and provides a wide range of services to the community. Many nonprofits are now facing strong reforms in their organization and functioning. Since many of these organizations provide direct services to users, they are increasingly concerned about the efficiency, effectiveness and quality of the services provided. With most public and nonprofit organizations, accountability channels tend to be short, and the stakeholders, especially the funders, have direct contact with the organization. With that in mind, this organization, which I call Social Services for the Community (SSC), was chosen based on its size, its variety of service delivery, its reputation as an innovative organization, and its role in providing important public services. My professional background in the public and social service sectors allowed a familiarity with the culture and language of these types of organizations, although I did not have any experience specifically with this organization. I will take the benefits of narrative inquiry, and the significance of it for purposes of knowledge transfer, and apply them to this social service organization with a public mission.

In 2003, based on an interest in integrating and consolidating entities with similar functions, four organizations delivering support services began the process of merging into one large organization. This larger organization was then able to take advantage of an “economy of scale” to combine the functions of human resources, financial management, operations, and development. The consolidated organization came into being in 2004, and was continuing function integration when I began my interviews in late 2005. The initial roll-out affected the central services functions, and once in place, the program integration would follow. This organization has a good reputation for fundraising, as well as being good ambassadors for serving the poor.

Chapter 5 examines the qualities of narratives, and provides a description of the three organizational challenges that were identified through interviews, direct observation, and source documentation. In this chapter, I describe the model that was used to collectively assign meaning to the organizational challenges, and how the narratives of these challenges, when assigned meaning, allowed knowledge to be transferred in the organization.

Chapter 6 provides an analysis of the intersection between the organizational challenges, and the model is used to understand the collective assignment of meaning. This model, which I term the “traffic circle” shows the challenges coming together in a centralized location, and the collective assignment of meaning allows the participants to leave the “traffic circle” with a new view of the challenge. This chapter also includes a discussion of the tools that are used to aide with the assignment of meaning to the challenges. Chapter 7 will provide a discussion of the findings and the conclusions, and the role that narratives play in knowledge transfer.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

By focusing on narratives in a social service organization with a public partnership mission, this dissertation focuses on the intersection of three areas of literature: how knowledge is present in organizations, how informal knowledge is transferred in organizations, and the literature that examines the research methodology of narrative inquiry.

The use of narrative inquiry for public organizational research has been less common than in other disciplines (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). This case study involves a nonprofit organization with a public mission, utilizing funds from the public sector to carry out its activities. Reliance upon nonprofits to conduct the business of government is growing, therefore understanding these organizations is crucial for public administration. Although the use of narratives has been used to study organizations, the application of narrative inquiry within the field of public administration is an important contribution, especially in the nonprofit realm, as narrative inquiry can be useful for enhancing our understanding of complex social phenomena (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). There is also significance in the way we understand knowledge and learning, which leads to a better understanding of the practice of public administration. This research fills the literature gap in the organizational learning literature by using narrative inquiry applied directly to an organization responsible for public programs in order to study knowledge transfer, particularly the transfer of informal knowledge that occurs through the collective assignment of meaning to organizations challenges.

Research has been done applying interpretivist narrative inquiry to the study of leadership, to understand intention and action, and in the area of decisionmaking (Ospina & Dodge, 2005; Feldman, 2002; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). This research attempts to bridge the gap between practitioners and academics by using a research approach grounded in narratives. My study will use narrative inquiry at the social service organizational level in order to identify the role of narratives in knowledge transfer. The collective assignment of meaning is a complex social phenomenon that influences organizational dynamics and practices, which then influences service delivery. In this literature review, I will discuss the types of knowledge as they have been classified in the literature. Then I will discuss informal knowledge transfer as the collective assignment of meaning given to an organization's narratives, which are developed into the main organizational challenges. In the last section, I will discuss the use of narrative inquiry as the vehicle for the collective assignment of meaning.

2.2 Knowledge in Organizations

Interest in knowledge and narratives has grown in the last decade among public administrators because it addresses the issues of change, innovation, and environmental adaptation, all major concerns in organization theory and practice. Knowledge and knowledge transfer approaches highlight the act of changing by examining how agency members struggle to apply experience and information to entrenched routines, to attribute causes to the problems they face, and to create remedies for those problems. Knowledge transfer has been described in the literature as organizational learning, and is often described as a rational process. However, there are those who view organizations from a

cultural lens, and they see learning as a group process (Yanow, 2000). Emphasizing the social context within which organizational learning occurs highlights the intersubjectivity of organizational knowledge, and the fact that the process of organizational learning is largely interpretive.

Knowledge in organizations is generally categorized into two types: informal knowledge, and formal knowledge (Nonaka, 1994; Davenport & Prusak, 2000). The focus of this dissertation is informal knowledge. The literature discussion that follows refers to informal knowledge in many ways, including: active; implicit; tacit; contextual; “know-how;” folklore; embedded and practiced; and collectively held, just to name a few. Each of these labels implies a type of knowledge that is used for action. Formal knowledge, on the other hand, is explicit knowledge that is cognitive, and gained from traditional rote methods, such as manuals, operating procedures, or PowerPoint presentations. Formal knowledge is held individually by members of the organization, but also includes a collective form when the individuals combine their knowledge.

In understanding these two types of knowledge, the knowledge literature provides a diversity of explanations for how knowledge is transferred between individuals and across organizations. The literature differs, however, based on the unit of analysis, and the type of knowledge that is being transferred. The literature carefully distinguishes between data, information, and knowledge. Data can be defined as discrete bits and numbers. They are self-contained, and in isolation, have no meaning. Information comes from the data that is collected. The information needs context. This context, when it is combined with information to create the capacity to act, is known as “knowledge.”

Informal knowledge is drawn from everyday experiences that help individuals and organizations solve real-world practical problems. It involves the application of experience in particular situations. It includes “know-how,” rules of thumb, experience, insights and intuition, and folklore (Davenport & Prusak, 2000). An example of the application of informal knowledge would be legal interpretations. Informal knowledge is hard to express, process, capture, or transmit in any systematic or logical manner. On the other hand, formal knowledge is made up of the things that we can write down, share with others, or put into a database (Davenport & Prusak, 2000). It is generally “set in stone” and does not change over time. An example of formal knowledge would be the list of elements that make up the “Periodic Table of Elements.”

The communication of informal organizational knowledge can include tales and legends to be passed on through various means. An important distinction, however, is that knowledge is more than just information. Knowledge is information that has been consciously processed, and has established meaning and value for those who use it (Sallis & Jones, 2002; DeLong, 2004, Spender, 1996; Orlikowski, 2002). This concept of knowledge as the capacity for effective action, or decision-making, in the context of organized activity, means that we can look at knowledge transfer as a collective process dependent on relationships and interactions between individuals (Sallis & Jones, 2002). This type of knowledge is embedded and practiced, and can be used for action.

Informal knowledge is emphasized by Scott (1995), who provides a comprehensive definition of knowledge in organizations as consisting of cognitive structures and activities that provide stability to social behavior. This structure provides the centrality of rules and the frames through which meaning is made. Importance is

given to routines, conceptions of identity, guidelines for sensemaking and choosing meaningful actions, adopting a common point of reference, and embracing shared situational definitions. These shared situational definitions are the narratives that play out in addressing organizational challenges. These stories facilitate a collective assignment of meaning to those challenges that allows for problem solving (Scott, 1995).

The important distinction between informal and formal knowledge is sometimes referred to the difference of “knowing how” and “knowing that.” In his book *The Concept of the Mind* (1949), Gilbert Ryle, an English philosopher, made the distinction between knowledge that is built up through experience, the informal knowledge, and knowledge that is rule based, the formal knowledge. The nature of knowledge, both informal and formal, has an important cultural base. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) note that the Japanese have a business culture of continuous improvement and innovation, and this leads them to value and convert the formal to informal knowledge, through their team and quality circle approach.

Learning “how” and learning “that” have been a part of the divergence in literature that has focused on the ways people construct and reconstruct knowledge. The idea of “knowing-how” is captured by Huysman and de Wit (2002) in a discussion on how to institutionalize knowledge processes. One of the processes noted is “internalization.” Internalization is the acquisition of informal organizational knowledge. Spender (1996) refers to this internalized social knowledge, which is of an informal nature, as “collective knowledge.” Sims (1999) notes that a powerful way to support the transfer of this collective knowledge is through telling stories or swapping anecdotes.

In order to understand the importance of informal knowledge, it is helpful to look at Thomas Kuhn's (1962) work that emphasized the interactivity and interdependence of content and context, and this work helped him conceive of the various paradigms as possible alternate readings of a contextual reality. In his discussion of Kuhn's epiphany, Bradt (1997, p. 47) notes, "Kuhn learned that conceptual frameworks, prevailing models of mind and reality, and criteria of interpretation radically affected content and meaning. With alternate readings of the texts of history and science, Kuhn saw that truth could be multiple, various, plural, changing dynamically with each new reading and reader of text and tradition." Kuhn's theory of incommensurability between paradigms meant that different types of knowledge could exist.

Another way of looking at knowledge within organizations uses Scarborough and Swan's (1999) template for classifying knowledge. In the informal model, which they refer to as the "community model," learning occurs, and knowledge is created, mainly through conversations and interactions *between* people so that learners are conceived as "social beings who construct their understanding and learn from social interaction within specific socio-cultural and material settings." However, in the formal model, which they call the cognitive model, knowledge is viewed as concepts and facts, it is transferred through texts and information systems, the dominant metaphor is human memory, and the critical success factor is technology. In contrast, the community model for knowledge views knowledge as socially constructed and based on experience, it is transferred through participation, the dominant metaphor is human community, and the critical success factor is trust. Earlier research has questioned the adequacy and relevance of these cognitive theories of learning (Marswick & Watkins, 1990; Garrick, 1998). Lave

and Wenger's (1991) *Situated Learning* answered these questions with a call to understand that knowledge is both embodied, or "lived-in," and culturally embedded.

The literature focus, then, for the types of knowledge that are present in organizations, shows a combination of informal and formal knowledge. The informal knowledge literature focuses on collective knowledge that uses narratives within an organization to assign meaning to the everyday events and actions of the people in the organization. The next section will discuss the literature on the actual transfer process for informal knowledge.

2.3 Informal Knowledge Transfer

There is a broad literature that challenges the way informal organizational knowledge transfer occurs. One of the features of this literature seems to be the clash between one way of conceptualizing knowledge in organizations, and the actual ways in which people in these organizations transfer knowledge. There is a growing group of authors who argue that learning and knowledge are embedded, and inextricably bound up with working (Huysman & de Wit, 2002; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Gherardi, 2000; Nicoloni & Mezner, 1995; and Yanow, 2000). This research shows that organizations or small groups contain a collective knowledge that is developed and learned through the actions and interactions of the participants in very specific historical, social or cultural contexts.

Informal knowledge transfer is about managing the learning processes. Historically, Cyert and March (1963) were among the pioneers in looking at knowledge transfer as a learning process. They argued that organizations learn by adapting their

objectives, attention and search routines to their experience. The idea of adaptation was carried further by Lave and Wenger (1991), who introduced a type of adaptation known as situated learning, with the concept of “legitimate peripheral participation” as a method of learning. This informal type of participation, or adaptation, can be viewed in contrast to learning outside the relevant task environment, in methods such as accumulating information from manuals. Case studies are often used to show that there is a gradual acquisition of knowledge and skills learned from the experts in the context of the everyday activities. These case studies emphasize that knowledge transfer requires social interaction and collaboration in order to collectively assign meaning to the everyday activities.

To better understand the informal knowledge transfer process, the term “knowledge transfer” is broadly used here to describe a continuum of knowledge activities, from the application of new knowledge to the broader harnessing of intellectual capital. Many scholars in the organizational theory realm emphasize that one of the most valuable economic resources for an organization is knowledge. Value is now created by ‘productivity’ and ‘innovation,’ which are both applications of knowledge to work (Drucker, 1993).

For purposes of my research, this concept of “value” ties in with informal knowledge transfer when a collective assignment of meaning is given to the narratives in an organization. This type of learning and knowledge sharing means that learning is a valuable social practice, and it should be grounded in theories of social practice. In any type of organization, informal learning can occur through observations or experiences (Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Some examples may include direct

observation, imitating, listening, participating, asking, trial and error, and real-life performance of certain skills (Bandura, 1977; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Informal knowledge transfer, which is the focus of this study, is an important part of knowledge sharing (Dominice, 2000; Freire, 1970; Foley, 1999).

Informal knowledge transfer that occurs through what Lave and Wenger refer to as “legitimate peripheral participation” calls to mind the power of stories and the impact of narrative. A good starting point for understanding the informal knowledge transfer of “know how” is to examine what happens in a listener’s mind as they hear or read a story. When a listener follows a story, they journey in their minds with the storyteller into a different world. It is the listener’s participation that conjures up this virtual world (Birkerts, 1994). The transition in the mind of the listener from physical to virtual world is an active transition, not passive. When fully engaged, Birkerts argues, the listener’s mind works in concert with the storyteller to focus entirely on generating an embedded virtual world of a story. By “being present” in the story, the listener establishes a certain level of “legitimate peripheral participation” that allows knowledge transfer or “know-how” to be gained.

Informal knowledge transfer can be seen as a process through which an organization constructs knowledge or reconstructs existing knowledge (Huysman & de Wit, 2002; Weick & Westley, 1996). The focus of this type of research is on a collective knowledge construction. It focuses on informal knowledge, and pulls from the literature of Cook and Yanow (1993), Nicolini and Mezner (1995), and Gherardi (2000). Although knowledge transfer and “know how” take place at the individual level, informal knowledge transfer is not simply the cumulative result of the learning of individuals. It is

an organizational process (Hedberg, 1981; Shrivastava, 1983). Knowledge transfer at the organizational level occurs through the medium of individual members, but each individual's personal knowledge can be transformed into organizational knowledge that has value to the organization (Nonaka, 1991; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Shrivastava, 1983). The learning that takes place at the individual level only makes sense, and is transferred as knowledge, in the collective context.

This collective context that is applied to informal knowledge can be seen as a form of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking has several characteristics that identify elements of informal knowledge transfer: it is retrospective; it is enacted in social environments; it is ongoing; it is focused on and extracted from cues. These characteristics described by Weick also show that although accuracy is important in recounting experiences, it is not necessarily required because narratives of past experiences are actually edited reconstructions. They are evolving stories that show "patterns that may already exist in the puzzles an actor now faces, or patterns that could be created anew in the interest of more order and sense in the future" (p. 45). For example, as a researcher, I participated in the enactment of the collective assignment of meaning to the challenges that were told by the interviewees. I observed and noticed what was being said by certain persons, and from their stories, I extracted cues from an ongoing flow of events. Through my memos and journal, I was able to use retrospection to speculate on the meaning of these cues, and then weave them together into common threads or streams, which make up the cultural capital of an organization.

The accumulation of informal knowledge within a system is often called cultural capital. Cultural capital can be transferred across generations (Berkes, 2000), or it can

take place through a sense of connectedness that grows over time (Berry, 1977; Kemmis, 1998). This connection means that the combination of an individual's interaction with the world, a locale, and a community over time produces a heritage of language, memory, tools, skills, and knowledge (Berry, 2000). This type of knowledge, described earlier as informal, creates networks of social relationships, known as social capital, that can be used for knowledge transfer (Scheneekloth & Shibley, 1995). It is through these embedded networks of social relationships, which are infused with high levels of social capital, that informal knowledge is effectively transmitted (Granovetter, 1973; Coleman, 1990). Thus, the individual plays a role in the informal networks by helping to establish the organization's collective and connective framework for knowledge to travel.

Although described as distinct activities, informal knowledge transfer in many organizations is viewed as a continuous activity. For example, in order for organizations to be effective, they must be able to predict changes in their environments and be able to react quickly and nimbly. This nimbleness is influenced by the organization's recognition that change occurs through journeys of learning (Shrivastava, 1983; Redding & Catanello, 1994).

The importance of informal knowledge transfer, or the "knowing how," is emphasized by Orlikowski (2002) in her article studying a global organization. She highlights the idea that knowledge is "enacted" every day in people's practices. Knowledge and practice are so bound and embedded within each other that it becomes difficult to differentiate between our knowing (a verb) from our knowledge (a noun). As mentioned earlier, our learning, knowing, and teaching are "reconstituted" over time. People, by nature, continually reconstitute their knowing over time and across contexts.

As this process occurs, they also modify their knowing as they change their practice. New practices take shape as people invent or learn new ways of interpreting and experiencing their world. In the later chapters, I will refer to this “reconstituting” as retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and the meaning that is assigned to the knowledge, or narratives, comes about through the collaborative actions of the participants. Some scholars, however, have noted the limitations of the sensemaking framework. For example, an important gap is the lack of insight into the role that organizational rules play on the sensemaking process (Helms Mills, 2003). Additionally, the sensemaking perspective does not address the issues of organizational politics and power, so that, “although it may be true that everyone can be said to engage in the process, it is far from clear that everyone is equal in the process,” (Helms Mills & Mills, 2000).

The process of informal knowledge transfer, even at the individual level, is social (Levine, Resnick, & Higgins, 1993). When we move beyond the individual level to the group, however, we see informal knowledge transfer as a collaborative or mutual activity, where the embedded collective experience of a group, as well as each individual’s experience outside the group, is collectively transformed into new knowledge.

This transformation of informal knowledge into action occurs as a result of the use of dialogue. One of the major features of the collaborative knowledge transfer perspective is that a major part of our knowledge base arises from our interactions, or the dialogue, we have with others (White, 1999). This idea of collaborative group learning is grounded in pragmatism. Follett’s (1998, 1924) description of the group process, and creation of “the collective idea” is today called “collaborative learning.” As Follett notes,

effective group process occurs, not by supplanting “my idea with yours,” but by “harmonizing differences through interpenetration.” Rather than focusing on the extremes to be simply accepted or rejected by the group, boundaries are spanned by focusing on the similarities, which are “interknitted” into an altogether new approach or idea that emerges from the authentic group encounter.

Therefore, it is not only individuals in the group who learn, or are capable of acquiring new informal knowledge, but the group, as a collective entity, also learns. Kasl and Marsick (1997) explain that group learning occurs when “all members perceive themselves as having contributed to a group outcome, and all members of the group can individually describe what the group as a system knows.” Normative processes can be defined, and this leads to enhancing informal knowledge transfer capability. The literature is split, however, on whether linear models or cyclical models can describe the knowledge transfer process. The linear model, proposed by Argyris (1986), addresses the single- and double-loop learning. The cyclical models do not impose any hierarchies, but rather, make the claim that the enhancement of organizational knowledge transfer is a continuous process. Many of these models are based on Kolb’s (1984) work, and use an interpretive research methodology. There is a layered circularity of sensemaking that is used to characterize interpretive research methods (Yanow, 2004).

This concept of a shifting conceptual framework is key to understanding how informal knowledge helps organizations learn and transfer knowledge, because humans create narrative descriptions that give sense to the behavior of others. Narrative is also helpful for creating and constructing imaginary “what if” scenarios that can be useful in organizations as different scenarios present themselves. These scenarios, and their

interpretations, help create understanding of the ambiguities that can be present with organizational challenges.

This concept of a shifting conceptual framework, or standpoint, was reflected in the organizational studies of Berger and Luckman (1966), and other social constructionist with arguments that understanding one's social reality reflects one's personal experiences. Jacobsen and Jacques (1990), in their research about "knowers" and "knowns" document the role that informal knowledge rather than universal knowledge plays in organizations. Informal knowledge acquired through narratives allows various viewpoints, or standpoints, to be heard within an organization, so that, as Ospina and Dodge (2005) note, "The narrative inquirers appreciate the value of and tap into the practical and narrative knowing that is characteristic of many dimensions of public life." This view of how knowledge is transferred through narratives also emphasizes the importance of narratives for assigning meaning.

The focus of this study, with the emphasis on informal knowledge transfer, draws from the social perspective of narratives as they relate to knowledge transfer and "knowing." As Easterby-Smith and Araujo (1999) indicate, meanings are constructed through dialogue, and concepts are communicated through storytelling. The work of Nancy Dixon (1994) carries this further, with organizational knowledge transfer seen as the activation of the experiential learning cycle, where learning can be accomplished, not only individually, but also collectively. The experiential learning cycle, embedded in the culture of an organization, can be applied collectively to a group. Part of achieving this competence, this "knowing how," this informal knowledge transfer, can be facilitated by

using narratives to make sense out of the fragments and complexities of our day-to-day situations.

Some newer thinking on knowledge transfer and narrative inquiry looks at how informal knowledge “flows” or “spirals” within organizations. Nonaka (1991) considers knowledge flow through four steps: socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization. This type of knowledge flow involves the conversion of formal knowledge into informal knowledge through various “flows” or steps. The concept of “flow” was put forward by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) as a psychological state in which an individual who is performing a task loses track of time, and easily and naturally makes use of all of his/her experience and knowledge to achieve some goal. One of the challenges for knowledge transfer is how to embed this “flow” into an organization. Bennet and Bennet (2003) identify the usefulness of knowledge transfer as a means to create an “organizational synergy” that moves the knowledge-based organization to achieve its best performance or flow. Narrative inquiry, which I will discuss next, and other research methods that rely heavily on narratives, offer opportunities for connectedness that are enhanced with the knowledge “flows.” This concept of “flows” or “spirals” will be discussed further in Chapter 6 when I describe the “traffic circle.”

2.4 Narrative Inquiry Literature

Although narrative inquiry has been used to study organizations, the role narratives play within a social service nonprofit agency has not been extensively researched. Narratives in a smaller, more nimble environment, allow a researcher to look at how narrative inquiry can be used to study the transfer of knowledge. Berger and

Luckman (1966) introduced the notion that we know the world, not just by objectively observing our external reality, but also by constructing how we understand it with others. This theory, known as “constructionist epistemology” has been adopted by narrative inquirers who capture the interpretations of individuals as they view reality, as well as the shared construction among the given community (Dodge et al. 2005). Narratives can be used to shed light on the constructed reality that they reflect, as well as the experiences of those participants who engage in narratives. People are purposeful agents who create and use stories to communicate meaning (Feldman, 2002).

There continues to be a debate about using narrative inquiry as a research methodology. The debate revolves around the argument that narratives can exist on the boundaries of two opposing "grand narratives" in research. On one side are "reductionist" research traditions that use the breaking down of phenomena into analyzable parts. On the other are researchers who approach their work from broader theoretical positions that allow crossover generalizations from the study of specific phenomena. Narrative inquiry bridges both of these traditions. The use of narrative inquiry as a research methodology has gained value for three reasons. First, narratives convey meanings, intentions, beliefs, and values that reflect a situated social reality. Second, narratives carry practical knowledge. And third, and perhaps most important to the literature, narratives are constituted, and meanings are given shape, by individuals for their own purpose (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). Glover (2004) used narrative inquiry in a grassroots organization to explain and describe certain courses of action. He indicated that nonprofit and volunteer organizations are constructed collectively, and meanings, interpretations, rituals demand the use of interpretive approaches to be understood. Maynard-Mooney and Moshino's

(2003) book on stories from the front lines of public service, identified the usefulness of “story-based” research as a means to collect narratives that are then retrospectively examined for theory-relevant themes.

Stories can be viewed as mental software that is supplied so that a listener can run it again later using new input specific to the situation. Once installed, a good story replays itself. In this context, a story helps listeners to interpret future events along the same lines. The research shows that organizational narratives help us remember and make sense of complexities in our everyday world (Simmons, 2001; Sims, 1999, Bruner, 1990; Bennett & Feldman, 1981). The use of narrative inquiry also helps us to make sense of notions such as identity. The value of narrative inquiry is that it makes the implicit and the tacit inferable to the reader or the listener. Practitioner stories are powerful research tools that offer a window into the world that is often blocked by traditional methods of social science. The “narrative inquiry” approach, which is a research technique that emphasizes the stories people tell and how these stories are communicated, helps create the bridge between context and cognition.

Stories are an important source of data for organizational ethnographers, as noted by Schwartzman (1993) because “they are often natural answers to the recurring questions that individuals in organizations ask themselves.” The continual narration of organizational stories helps to cast and recast the way the individuals experience their organization. In his work with the World Bank, Denning (2001) found that “stories work because they are efficient ‘carriers’ of high-impact tacit knowledge.” They can carry large amounts of knowledge in small packages. Schank (1990) identifies the value of narratives as providing “scripts.” He notes, “Life experience means quite often knowing

how to act and how others will act in given stereotypical situations. That knowledge is called a script.”

As mentioned earlier, my research will use the terms “stories” and “narratives” interchangeably (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). For some researchers, stories differ from narratives in that they entail a certain poetic license that can involve complex plots, intense emotions, and ambiguity (Gabriel, 2000). However, other scholars treat stories as fragments or pieces of “grand narratives,” (Brown, 1990). In using narrative inquiry as the research approach for studying the transfer of knowledge, it is important to note that embedded narratives refer to a layering of stories in texts, contexts, and audiences that can lead to the ongoing and unending construction of meaning (Putnam & Boys, 2006).

The benefit of narrative inquiry use in a nonprofit agency is the ability to use the participants as sources of legitimate knowledge, as producers of knowledge, and as connected users of knowledge within the organization (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). The ability to use narrative in practice allows the narratives to be dissected in order to study the useful knowledge they contain, and how the narratives are used to inform practice. Social phenomena, then, become the intersection point for individual, collective, and cultural stories.

2.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, I discussed the literature review related to knowledge that is present in organizations, knowledge that is informally transferred within organizations, and how the literature treats narrative inquiry. The literature identified the role that narratives play in addressing organizational challenges, and provided the historical

connection to the dissertation topic of knowledge transfer. Such a review of relevant literatures helped me to refine the research questions and to identify an appropriate research approach that is described in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

Ethnography is a holistic research method focusing on the sociology of meaning through close field observation of sociocultural phenomena. The fieldwork is intended to reveal common cultural understandings related to the phenomena under study. The ethnographer writes about the routine lives of people. According to Fetterman (1989, 32), “The more predictable patterns of human thought and behavior are the focus of inquiry. The ethnographer is interested in understanding and describing a social and cultural scene from the insider’s perspective.” In my research, I used the basic assumptions proposed by Feldman (1995, 11):

1. Actions and interactions have meaning for participants. Both following norms and deviating from them are meaningful acts. While the meaning of following norms is often well established, the meanings of deviations often need to be constructed. Meaning may also need to be constructed if no shared norms exist.
2. Participants mutually engage in ethnomethodology to construct meaning. The means participants use to construct meaning is the primary focus of the ethnomethodologist's attention.

My ethnographic case study focused on the telling and use of narratives to collectively assign meaning to organizational challenges. As meaning was assigned, knowledge was transferred in the organization, and that knowledge was used by the organization for action. The incorporation of, and the application of, these narratives are the process by which meaning is assigned in the organization, and as meanings are assigned to the narratives, knowledge is transferred in the organization. The emphasis of

ethnographic studies is on everyday practices, especially on the ways people produce social order and meaning when interacting with each other (Hester & Eglin, 1997).

The social service agency I observed provides a wide array of services to the Washington, DC area. The mission of the organization, which I call Social Services for the Community (SSC), is to serve those who are poor, and shelter those who are homeless. Their services include day care, emergency assistance, employment assistance, housing, substance abuse counseling, and legal assistance. This agency was chosen based on its size, its variety of service delivery, its reputation as an innovative organization, and its role in providing important public services. It has over 800 employees, providing a wide range of interview possibilities with persons in headquarters as well as on the boundaries of the organization. The provision of multiple services means that coordination is a huge challenge. SSC's reputation as an innovative organization stems from its long history of providing services, and its ability to use technology to manage and maintain service coordination and information. Because of the provision of multiple and varied services, with many contracts with numerous Federal agencies, this agency, with its public mission, provided an organization with a nexus between the public sector and the nonprofit community.

3.2 Focused Narratives

Three organizational challenges were identified and analyzed for this study. The challenges were identified and examined using narratives told by management and staff of the organization, as well as field observations, and information gathered in interviews with clients, volunteers, and representatives of the governing board. These three

challenges were identified by members of the organization as ongoing points of conflict or trials faced by the organization, and they each constituted embedded cases within the larger case study. I focused on the three challenges, and the stories told about these challenges, and the meaning assigned to these challenges, I collected common stories, and the shared experiences from various levels of the organization were identified based on specific processes or points of conflict or trials faced by the organization.

In addition to informal interviews and on-site observations, I also used document collection, direct observation, participant observation, and semi-structured and structured interviews to gather my data. Although the process of conducting interviews may influence the participants' understanding of narratives, I was sensitive in the format of my questioning to provide for "open-ended" questions and elaborations by the participants. I also included alternations between the interviews and time spent in the organization observing to allow the meanings and use of narratives by organization members to be presented. The initial interviews included stories across the organization, but after approximately ten interviews, the three challenges began to emerge from the questions, and the following interviews were concentrated on collecting stories as they related to the three organizational challenges.

According to Weiss (1994), there are generally two kinds of interviews: 1) surveys, which are used mostly for quantitative research, and feature close-ended questions which can easily be turned into statistical data; and, 2) qualitative interviews with open-ended questions, with answers that take the form of a narrative by the respondent about his or her experiences. Weiss favors the qualitative interviewing

approach because he believes that the qualitative approach of interviewing gives researchers a better snapshot of the perspective of the subjects of the study.

The earlier interviews included more open and ambiguous questions to allow the interviewees an opportunity to answer in ways with content that was important to them. These “descriptive,” or “grand tour,” questions help focus on the “what” as opposed to the “why” questions. These interviews provided a wider sample of key terms and folk terms in the context of their use. Following the first few interviews, “mini-tour” questions were used to develop more detailed descriptions of specific terms, activities, and narratives. These questions were used to identify and narrow the three challenges that I followed in the organization. My field observations took place at various service delivery sites in the area. My field notes included examples of knowledge transfer used within the organization, formal or informal, and ways narratives are used for the knowledge transfer. The interview process was a “rolling” process with initial head staff directors providing another link for interviews, either internal or external to the organization, and this “rolling” process was important for capturing the dynamic and natural flow of the narratives.

Although the interviews could have been recorded, and the recordings could have been transcribed, for purposes of my research, I chose to engage in open conversations with the interviewees, and I elected not to record the interviews. With the merger still in progress, and many people speaking of an ongoing challenge, I felt that the absence of a recorder allowed more candid conversations, and more access within the organization. When possible, my field notes include direct quotes. However, the majority of my field

notes include the conversational stream of thoughts from the interviewees, and I worked to capture the “gist” of the conversation in my notes providing my interpretation of the way in which the collective assignment of meaning took place, as recommended by Zuboff (1988). The “gist” is captured through intellectual skills, as defined by Zuboff (1988, p. 76), which involve the competencies of abstraction, inference, and procedural reasoning. It should be noted that in certain ethnographic studies, recording the meaning of what is being said rather than the exact words of the interviewees is more important for certain contexts (Perry, 1998; Stake, 1995).

3.3 Case Study Method

The case study methodology for this dissertation is limited to a single case. Yin (2003) states that a single-case study is appropriate when a researcher has the chance to observe and analyze a phenomenon previously inaccessible to scientific investigation. This organization has not been previously studied to the extent of this research project. It has been opened to this researcher without reservation. With permission to review the organization as a whole, a definitive study can be made.

The second justification of single-case study research presents the notion of comprehensive interaction. This notion expresses the idea of blended boundaries between context, for example, the organization, its culture, its communication, and the phenomenon that is being observed, in this case, knowledge transfer. This research may be found to support an understanding of comprehensive interaction.

The third justification for single-case study research is that multiple sources of evidence can be more readily obtained than with some other research techniques. For this study, three primary sources of data are used: personal interviews with persons in many different levels in the organization; direct observation; and publications about the organization from news and in-house sources. These three data sources allow the use of triangulation, which is a mechanism for constructing validity, and the correct operational measures for the concepts being studied (Yin, 2003). By using these three sources, I was able to obtain data on how meaning was collectively assigned to the three organizational challenges that were recounted through narratives.

This case study design assumed a single-case analysis with embedded cases. Yin (2003) points out that a case study calls for intensive amounts of data collection on a small number or a single unit of analysis. This embedded case study of a nonprofit organization provided an “intra-case” analysis in order to answer the questions of patterns and common themes, deviations from these patterns, and interesting stories emerging from the responses. I transcribed my extensive notes taken during the interviews as well as after the interviews, and included my field observations in order to identify patterns and themes. I made every attempt to adhere to Spradley’s (1980) guidance for note-taking, tracking such items as space, actors, activities, events described, time, goals and feelings. This list is elementary, but still indicates the range of relevant features of context that needed to be noted.

. The broad question to be addressed in my dissertation is: “What is the role that narratives play in knowledge transfer for addressing organizational challenges?” In order to answer this question, two research questions were posed and examined:

- First, can narratives be used as a means to explain knowledge transfer in a social service organization as a collective, interactive process?
- Second, do narratives create, or contribute to a “knowledge transfer flow” in the organization that can be observed?

In order to arrive at an answer to these questions, the interviews were loosely structured on the following questions:

- Can you describe one of the major challenges that your organization overcame in the last year?
- Can you give me an example of how your organization was able to overcome this challenge?
- Who are some of the people you rely on to help you with issues related to your job?
- Can you give me some examples of how your organization trains new employees?
- How were you trained when you started working here?

And each interview ended with the question, “Whom else would you recommend I talk to about the issues we’ve discussed today?” The answer to this question helped me develop my “web of knowledge” within the organization.

The purpose of these questions was to tease out the issues within the organization and to draw out the organizational narratives. As the interviews progressed, the rule of thumb was to allow the interviewees to provide the content, with me using the questions above, with the points identified by previous interviewees, as prompts in the discussion.

An element of the finessing of the questions involved what Spradley (1980) described as the listening and observing, in order to not only discover the answers, but also to find out which questions to ask.

3.4 Ethnographic Research

3.4.1 Data Collection

My approach followed basic assumptions of ethnography, (Sanday, 1979), which identifies a particular set of methodological and interpretive procedures:

- My research interest was affected by community cultural understandings;
- My research identified the formal, informal and individual-level perceptions that were played out in the culture;
- My background in social services allowed a “common” language and a familiarity with the technical jargon, and this common language is one of the bedrocks for ethnographic study;
- My research identified the knowledge transfer as it applied to social service agencies, and this transfer may not apply across other “cultures.”

After three or four interviews, I wrote a “memo” that summarized the observations of these interviews, and identified specific patterns. These memos allowed me to finesse the interview questions based on previous observations. This refinement of the questions, or progressive focusing (Parlett & Hamilton, 1976), allowed for adapting the questions as new issues became apparent. By keeping memos and reviewing them regularly, I was able to develop a type of “interim analysis” to reflect on the information

and the opinions from the various interviews (Creswell, 1998). The analytic notes and memos were used to construct an internal dialogue that provides the essence of reflexive ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). Interviews began in November, 2005, and continued through July, 2006. There were two exploratory aspects to the early interviews. One was the identification of the organizational challenges. In these stories, people focused on the organizational challenges that needed to be addressed. The other aspects of the interview focused on the way meaning was assigned to the narratives.

In addition to the memos, I maintained a journal to keep information related to setting up the interview, and documenting what occurred before, during and after each interview. Ives (1995) suggests the use of journals to document dates, persons, places, and reactions of the researcher or interviewee during the interview, and other clarifying factors that might provide additional understanding to the interview notes. The journals provided richness in participant observations, not only of the interviewee, but of those around before, during, and after each interview.

Kvale’s (1996) aspects of qualitative research interviews were applied. The table below replicates Kvale’s efforts to label the modes of understanding in a qualitative research interview: **TABLE ONE: KVALE’S ASPECTS OF RESEARCH**

Kvale’s Aspects of Qualitative Research Interviews	
Life World	The topic of qualitative interviews is the everyday world of the interviewee and his/her relation to it.
Meaning	The interview seeks to interpret the meaning of central themes

	in the life world of the subject. The interviewer registers and interprets the meaning of what is said as well as how it is said.
Qualitative	The interview seeks qualitative knowledge expressed in normal language. It does not aim at quantification.
Descriptive	The interview attempts to obtain open nuanced descriptions of different aspects of the subjects' life worlds.
Specificity	Descriptions of specific situations and action sequences are elicited, not general opinions.
Deliberate Naivete	The interviewer exhibits an openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having ready-made categories and schemes of interpretation.
Focused	The interview is focused on particular themes; it is neither strictly structured with standardized questions, nor entirely "non-directive."
Ambiguity	Interviewee statements can sometimes be ambiguous, reflecting contradictions in the world the subject lives in.
Change	The process of being interviewed may produce new insights and awareness, and the subject may, in the course of an interview, come to change his/her descriptions and meanings about a theme.
Sensitivity	Different interviews can produce different statements on the same themes, depending on their sensitivity to and knowledge

	of the interview topic.
Interpersonal Situation	The knowledge obtained is produced through the interpersonal interaction in the interview.
Positive Experience	A well carried out research interview can be a rare and enriching experience for the interviewee, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation.

3.4.2 Data Analysis

From the interview notes, memos, and journal notes, I transferred the narratives into a graphic organizer. I was then able to do the analysis necessary to determine an individual's patterns of interaction with other members of the organization. Although there are software programs that compute this function, I used a variety of shapes and colors in my coding, which proved indispensable in an understanding of the embedded nature of the narratives. It was from this graphic organization that the three major challenges with the organization began to emerge. Once coded, I returned to the stories told in the interviews, and, discounting the descriptive procedural pieces of the interviews, the ongoing, repeated, and emphasized narratives fell into the three challenges of the merger, the hiring and training of new people, and the challenge of bringing the merged organization together at one time.

In all, twenty-five members of the organization provided in-depth interviews of the organization. These interviews were conducted both on and off site. The interviews that were conducted in person lasted between one to two hours. Five of the interviews

were conducted by phone and lasted approximately one hour. One of the interviews included two persons, and this interview and site visit lasted four hours. This particular interview, with two employees who had worked together for ten years, allowed them to build upon each other's stories, and talk about performance awards the other had received without it appearing to be "bragging."

The interviewees included board members (2), vice presidents (3), staff (10), case managers (8), and program participants (2). The experience of the interviewees with the organization totaled more than 225 years, in either a volunteer or employee status. There was representation in the interviews by a member from each of the merged organizations. The persons to be interviewed received a written summary of the scope of the research, and any questions from the interviewees were answered at the beginning of the interview. I conducted follow-up interviews with five interviewees to discuss emerging patterns and verify points raised in earlier interviews. The core of the material analyzed included interviews with members from all areas and hierarchical levels of the organization. Permission for interviews was granted through the IRB process from Virginia Tech on December 19, 2005.

In addition to the interviews, several interviewees provided archival data on the organization. The documents included budgets, newsletters, yearbooks, brochures, PowerPoint presentations, Annual Reports, with many of these documents dating back almost thirty years. Included were various news articles related to the services being provided by the organization. These documents were used, with appropriate scrutiny, for comparative purposes. Documents can provide information on groups and settings that

cannot be obtained from first-hand observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). They also provide supplements to the stories people tell regarding the challenges and the collective assignment of meaning.

The two main fieldwork techniques used for this research included interviewing and observation. These techniques are used in an attempt to preserve voices from the field, as Czarniawska (2002) notes, in the form of a collage. She notes that a collage is used to acquire new meanings, which are created by being recontextualized (1998). This context is created through narratives that contain frames, facts, and metaphors. Rorty (1991) notes that facts are utterances that express collective experience in a way that does not produce too many protestations. This collective experience, or the collective assignment of meaning, creates an environment for knowledge transfer. The three challenges were verified as major organizational concerns by high-placed employees, as well as by mid-level managers and by front-line employees.

In many modes of research, analysis follows data collection. However, with ethnographic research, the analysis and data collection began simultaneously. My cultural immersion in the life of this social service agency was key to analyzing narratives that were used in the organization for knowledge transfer. As Ospina and Dodge (2005, 153) note, “A researcher may decide to use narratives as a tool to obtain meaningful information about a *topic of interest*, using in-depth interviews and analyzing the stories collected.” Many case studies are focused on explaining or predicting behavior. However, this interpretive study focused on interpreting social narratives used within the organization to determine the meanings of these narratives between the

participants of the group. Stake (1995) identifies one of the roles of a qualitative researcher as trying to preserve the multiple realities of the people studied, knowing that the persons being observed will provide different, and even contradictory, descriptions of what is happening in the organization.

In an ethnographic study, the categories that emerge in an analysis can be used to produce a description or explanation of the case that is being investigated. For my analysis, I used Miles and Huberman's (1994) approach to qualitative analysis, which describes the major phases of data analysis as follows: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data reduction forces choices about which aspects of the assembled data should be emphasized, minimized, or set aside completely for the purposes of the project.

Data display goes a step beyond data reduction to provide "an organized, compressed assembly of information that permits conclusion drawing..." A display can be an extended piece of text, or a diagram, chart, or matrix that provides a new way of arranging and thinking about the more textually embedded data. Data displays allow the researcher to extrapolate from the data in order to discern systematic patterns. The data displays allow descriptive inferences to be drawn from identifying trends, patterns, and differences. The data displays were the most helpful tool in the analysis of the data. Maxwell (1996) describes these as "concept maps" that help pull together, and make visible, what the implicit theory actually is, and can be used with the memos to help develop the theory.

Conclusion drawing involves stepping back to look at what the analyzed data mean and to assess their implications. Verification, integrally linked to conclusion drawing, involves another look at the data as many times as necessary to cross-check or verify these emergent conclusions. According to Miles and Huberman (1994, 18), "The meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility, their sturdiness, their 'confirmability' - that is, their validity." In qualitative research, validity means something different in this context than in quantitative evaluation, where it is a technical term that refers quite specifically to whether a given construct measures what it purports to measure. For the qualitative researcher, validity is a much broader concern for whether the conclusions being drawn from the data are credible, defensible, warranted, and able to withstand alternative explanations.

Though ethnomethodology is often viewed as a descriptive rather than an analytic endeavor, the triangulation approach to validation was used. This approach used a multi-method design, incorporating structured interviews, participant observation, as well as field notes. It is important to note that ethnography focuses on interpreting the qualities and dynamics of individual settings, so the issue of how we utilize the findings is prominent. Triangulation is the method of testing one source of information against another to strip away alternative explanations. The generalizability of the findings from this case study may be limited based on the interpretive approach used, and the "thick" nature of the study of the agency. Although a single case study may not provide enough evidence to make robust generalizations, it can establish the existence of certain phenomena (Van Maanen, 1998).

The validity and reliability of the study was ensured by the rules of scientific inference identified by King et al. (1994). With exploratory research that involves descriptive inferences, it is critical that a clear articulation of the methods and logic employed is provided with the study. The issues of validity and reliability are concerns with open-ended interviews. To address this issue, I employed multiple sources and asked interviewees to reflect on their positions, and to support their views with specific examples, as suggested by Berry (2002).

Although validity and reliability are always a concern, the criterion of case study analysis is essentially a question of plausibility. From the data observed, does the case study offer a plausible explanation of the phenomenon in question? In this study, these data could strengthen the premise within organizational structures, knowledge is transferred through narratives, and the meanings of these narratives are assigned collectively as the narratives are retold.

The model that was developed from the data analysis was an emergent model that came from the data. I entered the organization with the notion that stories exist in organizations and are told as a way to understand and make sense of the organization. As the stories were told and repeated, the model began to show an emerging pattern of stories, which helped to identify key challenges that the persons in the organization were coping with. The challenges were identified by the interviewees, and their collective sensemaking of these stories identified the ways and tools that were used for knowledge transfer.

3.5 Conclusions

This study is intended to provide insight into how an organization transfers knowledge that is embedded across to members who may need that knowledge. This section described the questions that were used to guide the research, and the way the data was collected and analyzed. With the information that was provided by various persons throughout the organization, the analysis of the data is plausible. The next chapter will provide a discussion of the agency that was studied, and the following chapters will provide a discussion of the findings of the study, and the themes and patterns that were discovered.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE AGENCY

4.1 Introduction

The nonprofit organization that I chose to study is located in the Washington, DC area, and provides a wide range of services to the community. Many nonprofits are now facing strong reforms in their organization and functioning. Since many of these organizations provide direct services to users, they are increasingly concerned about the efficiency, effectiveness and quality of the services provided. As with most public and nonprofit organizations, accountability channels tend to be short, and the stakeholders, especially the funders, have direct contact with the organization. With that in mind, this organization, which I call Social Services for the Community (SSC), was chosen based on its size, its variety of service delivery, its reputation as an innovative organization, and its role in providing important public services.

4.2 History of the Agency

Social Services for the Community has been serving persons in need in the Washington, DC metropolitan area for more than seventy-five years. The establishment of the organization in 1929 began as a means to provide support to families that had been devastated by the Great Depression. In the late 1940's the agency worked to help refugee groups resettle in the area. And the late 1980's began a new era of working to help homeless persons, and to bring attention to providing medical care and legal services for the underserved. Since 2000, there has been greater organizational emphasis on employment opportunities and educational services.

In 2003, the agency began the integration of four separately funded organizations into one larger entity. The direction to integrate was a response to the desire for more effective and professional coordination of service delivery. The consolidation was phased in over the next three years, with basic administrative functions being integrated, yet service delivery priorities are still being negotiated. The first two years of the consolidation focused on the tactical plan to establish the infrastructure of the new, larger organization, with emphasis on the governance structure and the Board of Directors.

Much of the history of the agency can be found in recent newsletters, in the Anniversary books (50th and 75th), in the organizations “yearbooks” that began in the mid-1980’s and continued until the late 1990’s, and the Annual Reports. The yearbooks provide an extensive history, with the mission and the goals, a synopsis of the services provided throughout that year, staff, corporate board, Board of Directors members, funding pie charts, and recognitions of award recipients and articles about the organization from papers and magazines. The photographs include special events throughout the year, such as the holiday party and the annual staff retreat.

4.3 Mission and Nature of Work

The mission of the Social Services for the Community is to care for those who are poor, to shelter those who are homeless, and to protect the vulnerable populations. The primary work of SSC is to help people in need strengthen and rebuild their lives. This is done by providing the opportunities for persons to gain economic security, good health, and meaningful involvement in the community. The work of persons within the agency revolve around housing services, employment services, children’s services, and adult

support services. The policy challenges in recent years have revolved around a “fatigue” around homelessness, despite the steady growth in numbers, an anti-immigrant feeling evidenced with the day labor center disputes, and the program cuts from Federal sources to programs serving the poor that have been necessary with the shifting in funding for Hurricane Katrina assistance and war-time assistance overseas. After Hurricane Katrina, the organization worked with the local community to help find property owners or real-estate agents who could donate vacant housing units. Every night, the organization provides housing to over 1,500 homeless adults and children. On a yearly basis, the diverse social services and housing is provided to over 120,000 persons.

4.4 Personnel

There are over 800 people employed by Social Services for the Community. Many of the staff are social workers, residential counselors, program managers, family support specialists, and program aides. The variety of services provided to the community calls for a variety of skill levels within the personnel system. Although the personnel system for Social Services for the Community is a fully integrated system with pay and benefits, the merged organization was originally made up of these four agencies:

- Mental Health for All (MHA) – this organization began as a drop-in social club for persons with mental illness. It expanded after the de-institutionalization of mentally ill persons in the late 1960’s, and began providing day services and case management. Its staff is made up of 130 persons with strong social work and mental health backgrounds.

- Developmental Disabilities Institute (DDI) – this organization has served children and adults with developmental disabilities for over 60 years. The 250 people who make up the staff have degrees in case management and health professions.
- Center for Immigrants (CI) – this organization has provided education, health, and social needs to immigrants for over 40 years. It has a staff of 40, and many are health care professionals.
- Community Needs and Services (CNS) – this organization is the largest of the four agencies that were merged. This organization is a multi-faceted social service agency that provides services to families, children, homeless persons, and low-income persons. The staff of 400 includes a wide range of skill and education levels, including persons skilled in child welfare services, family center counseling, and housing counselors. The staff for this agency has steadily grown; the 1979 organization yearbook identified the number of employees at 135.

4.5 Funding

The revenues for the organization come from various sources. Almost half of the budget comes from Federal and local grants and government contracts. Another quarter of the funding comes from program service fees and the capital contribution campaign. Various legacies and United Way funding supplement the revenue streams as well. The total yearly revenues for the organization are close to \$25 million, with 84% of these funds directly supporting the diverse programming of the organization.

4.6 Agency Chosen for Research

Many public organizations are working to provide services to the community, yet budgetary constraints create a certain competitiveness to show that programs are efficient, effective, and are providing quality services. With this in mind, this organization was chosen for the research because of its size, its diversity of service programs, its long-standing reputation in the community as a reliable deliverer of services, and its stability in the community. My professional background in the public and social service sectors allowed a familiarity with the culture and language of these types of organizations, although I did not have any experience specifically with this organization. I was seeking an organization that would provide ready access to all levels within the organization, from senior level managers, to program managers, to Board members. When I approached the organization to seek permission to do the research project, there was some hesitation, given the transitional nature of the consolidation at that time. However, I saw this transition time as an ideal point of entry into the organization, to enhance my ability to capture narratives with true clarity, and to provide the portal to other issues within the organization.

4.7 Conclusions

The intent of this chapter has been to provide the reader with a grounding in the historical, institutional and physical context of the organization Social Services for the Community (SSC). Historically and institutionally, this agency has provided ongoing social services to the Washington, DC area for over 75 years. This agency was chosen

for the research based on its size, its variety of service delivery, its reputation as an innovative organization, and its role in providing important public services.

CHAPTER FIVE: NARRATIVES AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHALLENGES

5.1 Introduction

My research identified the role narratives play in addressing organizational challenges by facilitating a collective assignment of meaning to those challenges that allowed for problem solving, or at least a way to cope with the challenges. The recurring narratives across the organization were used to construct a collective understanding of the ongoing challenges in the organization, and this collective meaning then allowed people to understand the issues, and develop ways of working with them. These narratives took on a “cumulative” quality with their repetitions and reiterations. The research challenge was to understand the meanings that were derived through narratives, and how the narratives and their meanings were assigned and used to address the challenges in the organization. The three organizational challenges that were followed included: 1) the challenge of merging into one large organization out of four smaller ones; 2) the challenge of bringing new people into the organization; and 3) the challenge of bringing the newly merged organization all together at one time. Multiple stories were told during interviews, and revolved around three themes: stories about events (especially historical events), stories about individuals, and stories that illustrated or invoked a particular value, so that each of the three challenges, with their cumulative nature, carried various stories that were descriptions of events, people, and values.

Carla O'Dell (1998) identifies an embedded loop that is used for knowledge transfer. In this loop, incoming stories are collected, organized, shared, adapted, used, recreated, and then the loop begins again. This loop is in place because knowing that the practices or knowledge is available isn't enough to ensure transfer or use of knowledge. She notes that the processes must explicitly address sharing and understanding of the practices by persons in the organization who are active recipients. This sharing and understanding of the informal knowledge through narratives is facilitated by the degree to which that knowledge is intertwined and situated within the organization. Additionally, the "absorptive capacity" of individuals that O'Dell identifies is enhanced when the knowledge that is being shared is located in a collective, interactive process.

5.2 Qualities of Narratives

In everyday conversations, the term "narrative" refers to any spoken or written representation. Narratives can be official representations, they can be invented or adapted, they can provide firsthand or secondhand experience, and they can highlight culturally common events (Schank, 1990). For purposes of this research, the most important quality of narratives is the role narratives play in constituting an organizational reality for participants. In the interviews and in my observations, I was able to hear and see the multiple organizational realities, and the stories that were told and repeated, and the morals that were taken from them, were what helped the organization construct the collective understanding of these realities. Through each of the three organizational challenges, the ongoing narrative of "professionalism" was described and included in many of the stories.

The framework that was used for studying the narratives at SSC was developed by Schwartzman (1993). Her framework identifies the types of stories that are generally told. She organizes narratives mainly into three categories: stories about events, stories about individuals, and stories that illustrated a particular value. As stories are repeated throughout the organization, they are collectively assigned meaning by the members. Another way of looking at the framework of these narratives is that the events, people, and values represent the *three sides of a prism – the story can enter the prism through any of the three sides (events, people, values), and as the story passes through the prism, it “refracts” and expands*. This “refraction” will be discussed later as I take each of the organizational challenges, and each is told as an event, as the key people involved with the event, and as the values invoked by the event, and I will look at the collective assignment of meaning to these three challenges.

In my data collection, three main focused narratives, or challenges, were told and retold. In the section that follows, I will discuss each of these challenges as they represented narratives of the organization’s events, people, and values. Whether the story was told as an event in the organization, or about people in the organization, or about a particular value relevant to the organization, the stories generally revolved around uncertainties and ambiguities, and were told as a way to make sense of these uncertainties. In the following chapter, I will look at how each of these challenges were originally assigned a meaning by the members, but as the stories were collectively told, the group assigned new meanings to these challenges, and how the emergent quality of the narratives was identified in the data. The narratives used in this chapter for explaining the three organizational challenges are taken from the field interviews

between February, 2006 and June, 2006. The observations included in this chapter were documented between November, 2005 and June, 2006.

5.3 Narratives of Organizational Challenges

In SSC, there were three main ongoing narratives, or common stories, that were told across the organization. The main story revolved around the merger. As questions regarding the challenges in the organization unfolded, the second common narrative revolved around how new people were brought into the organization. The questions of challenges also led to the third narrative of the desire to bring the whole organization together. These three narratives were chosen from the varied list of topics through the use of data display, which identified frequency and import from the twenty-five interviews and ongoing observations. Each of the organizational challenges, and the stories that contribute to them, are described by members of the organization as an “event” within the organization, and will identify key “people” who were responsible or who were helpful during the challenge, as well as the “values” that were reflected by the challenge. Although these challenges were presented in different ways by the interviewees, each was determined to be a major organizational challenge by the multiple iterations of the stories told about the challenges, and the evolutionary nature of the challenges as something dynamic and ongoing within the organization.

5.3.1 Merger

The overarching theme, or “**event**,” identified in the interviews revolved around the structural change that the organization had undergone in the last two years. For

economic and efficiency reasons, the organization had decided to create one large organization out of four smaller ones. The consolidation brought together four “legacy” organizations, and combined it, or merged it, into one “global” organization. This large organizational change created the opportunity for me to observe how organization members understood, addressed and made sense of the merger. Although the structural change committee included representatives from each of the four organizations, as well as persons at different levels in the organization, the interviews recounted stories of a long period of uncertainty and confusion, while reporting lines were determined, and vacancies were filled. Additionally, one of the four organizations was significantly larger than the other three, and there was concern on the part of the other three that this one entity would dominate decisions and culture. In this document, I will use the terms “merger” and “consolidation” interchangeably as they were used this way by most interviewees.

The challenge with any reorganization is that so many factors are unknown. This “event” narrative of the reorganization provided the magnifying glass to view the transfer of knowledge to the employees, since all of the employees within the smaller “legacy” organizations were affected by the change. Employees and supervisors wanted to know ahead of time what the new organization would look like. Part of the rationale, or the selling point, for creating one large organization was that, in a “funding challenged arena,” the merged organization could provide greater efficiencies, and thus, be able to function more professionally. Also, in a competitive funding environment, there is a need to change into a more cross-cutting organization – therefore, there was a sense of urgency. As one interviewee noted, “There is strength in size,” (field interview, 4/11).

These “selling points” were identified by upper management, as well as line supervisors, in the interviews, (field interviews, 3/31, 4/11).

The notion of “size” in the organization was evident in how widespread the agency sites were located. I visited small, four room, facilities, and large shelters with over 500 beds. The staff at each site was dressed professionally, greeting me warmly, and inviting me into their offices. Most of the offices were decorated with service plaques and awards, or motivational posters provided by the agency. Given the variety of services provided by the organization, I was able to participate “side-by-side” with many of the ongoing events within the facilities, such as a group meeting or food distribution.

At the time of my interviews, with the merging, the organization had been able to achieve a greater “economy of scale” for billing and hiring. For example, instead of each housing center or family center preparing its own job opening, the central services have been tasked with developing a list of all positions available for hire within the consolidated organization, and applications are taken centrally and screened (field interview, 3/31, 4/11). Additionally, the numerous contracts with state and local entities, as well as with different federal departments have required a centralized billing function that used to be done by four different systems (field interview, 3/17, 4/11, 4/15).

With the “event” of combining four separate entities, the organization basically doubled in size. This doubling in size, however, created serious growing pains. Initially, there were serious communication problems, as identified by program managers. In order to address this, many interviewees cited the use of e-mail to help with the communication. Many people felt that having the President of the organization visit each site helped immensely. These “town hall” meetings were well received, and lent

credibility to the consolidation process. By being available in person to the staff, the President was able to answer their direct questions, and this helped to alleviate some of the uncertainties associated with the consolidation.

Part of the loss though, and part of the sadness that I observed with the “event” of the consolidation, was having to change the organization’s name. The new name, Social Services for the Community, didn’t belong to any of the four entities, so each had to adapt to the new “brand” name. This neutral name was chosen because it still reflected the mission of the organization. The decision was made not to adopt the name of the largest of the four entities so that the reorganization wouldn’t be perceived as a “takeover.” As the ongoing story of the merger was told to me by the interviewees, the “name change” was one of the biggest stumbling blocks to acceptance of the merger by many of the employees. As the stories were told about the name change, many people still said that the new name was difficult to accept. One interviewee offered me two business cards, one with the old organizational name, and one with the new organizational name. When I asked him why he had two, he said, “Just in case the new name doesn’t catch on,” (field interview, 3/8). Although the consolidation brought about many uncertainties to the organization’s daily workload, the name change seemed to provide the “lightning rod” for people to channel their frustration and stress.

For many of the persons who were interviewed, this name change, or loss of identity, has been a huge hurdle for the new organization. Although they have resigned to use the new name, there was a longing in many of the stories told in the interviews for the “old days” when the organization was smaller, and reporting structures felt more certain. The meaning assigned to the name change was fairly universal, from

headquarters staff to program managers and line supervisors. People understood why a change was needed, but weren't necessarily supportive of the new "brand" name. It is interesting to note that at many of the sites that I visited, and many of the e-mail addresses that I used, the old name was still in place on the signs and addresses.

During the interviews, many **people** were singled out as key to the merger. The President, of course, played an integral part, with his presentation of the merger, and with his site visits to each of the organization's program areas to hold a "town hall" meeting with employees. In addition to the more visible role of the President, there were a handful of people who were charged with organizing the task forces and with implementation roles. These people were singled out by various interviewees for their strong ability to listen to the concerns of others during the merger, with one person even referring to them as "therapists." As I heard the story told, these people "helped me get through that stressful time." Given the stressful nature of a merger, with uncertainty related to jobs and reporting lines, these key people, with their access to information, were able to take the collective concerns to management to help with a "reality check." Although this reporting back up the levels of management was not institutionalized formally, it was recognized by many interviewees for its informal nature.

One of the **values** highlighted during the interviews was the organization's strength and reputation in responding quickly to a need in the community. The interviewees expressed concern that, as the organization grew, would it be able to respond as quickly and nimbly as it had in the past to address these new needs? Additionally, the four entities were tasked with numerous functions, many of them duplicative. The ability to bring together so many programs has been "a promising, and

yet a frustrating proposition” (field interview, 3/17). The balance that many persons were trying to understand was an organization that is professional and runs like a business, but still has to answer to its mission of serving the neediest people. This conversation with persons at all levels of the organization provided the window I had sought to understand the informal, and yet situated nature of the interactions within the newly created consolidated organization. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, the values that were emphasized by each of organizational challenges, including the merger, were driven by a strong desire for professionalism within the organization.

By looking at stories that were told about the merger as stories about the event, or people key to the merger, or the values that were inherent with the merger, the challenge could be viewed from three different dimensions. The story, when viewed through the “prism” of events, people, and values, became richer, or more colorful, as the story was “refracted.” This refraction, or looking at the challenge from different angles to see aspects of it that were not originally apparent, is the essence of the collective assignment of meaning. Although the merger created a “grand narrative” as told by the interviewees, this organizational challenge was told in many different ways as stories related to events, people, and values.

5.3.2 New Employees

Good leaders in the organization were seen as those who were able to accept criticism, who didn’t get personal, who were able to say where things were with the organization. The type of stories that were told during the interviews addressing good leadership tied in with the second challenge point or “**event**” of bringing new people into

the organization. Several of the initial interviewees identified the organizational challenges of providing adequate training to new employees, and pairing that person up with someone who would be able to train them. This was expressed early in the interviews with a question that was posed to me, “How do we, as an organization, teach the “people connection” that we need in a social service organization?” (field interview, 3/8). In this organization, most of the training was seen as “shadow” training, or side-by-side, or one-on-one. In responding to the question introduced in Chapter 3, “How were you trained when you started working here?” most of the interviewees responded that learning the job was done “on-the-job.”

Many of the **people** interviewed had been with the organization more than ten years. There was almost unanimous consent that they learned “the ropes” as they went along. The “event” of being hired brought with it a mentality of “hitting the ground running” so that those who learned quickly were recognized and rewarded. The interviewees talked about the “tension” of maximizing talents and skills when new people are brought in. For example, many people are hired at the “professional” level, and many are hired as “paraprofessionals.” The professionals have college degrees, and may or may not have work experience. The paraprofessionals, on the hand, don’t have formal college education, but have “real world” work experience. One shelter operator told the story of the new social worker hired right out of graduate school. He said, “She had a degree on her wall, but no work experience in her head” (field interview, 3/8). She lasted a month at the organization, and when she left, she said, “I didn’t know it would be like this.” The challenge with training and retaining new hires means that the organization

continues to work to serve the clients in different ways, while at the same time, valuing the talents and skills of its employees.

New hires are brought in twice a month. The orientation training involves the basics of the organization as well as the benefits explanations. On the first day, the organization's President is available to greet the new hires and provide an overview of the organization. On this first day, the vision and the mission of the organization are explained. This training is done in mostly lecture format, and the person receives a manual with policies and procedures to read through. This was described by numerous interviewees, and the manuals were shown to me at many of the sites. Although I did not attend a "new employee" orientation, the schedule of the day was given to be my several interviewees, and I was able to look through the manual.

The organization **values** and is extremely effective at providing basic required health and employment related training, such as CPR and ethics. These include mandatory training profiles. However, once hired, the on-going education and training of the person is closely tied with their supervisor. The ongoing education of an employee, the "guts of learning," takes place and is dependent on the skill of the supervisor. New hires are required to attend a first-day orientation and training that stresses organizational mission and processes, and benefits. On the second day, the person reports to their work site. Since new hires are generally brought in bi-weekly, the President has made it a point to be available to speak to the new hires on their first day, and asks them to e-mail him after their first thirty days. This information was recounted to me several times by people who had participated in these meetings, and these stories were told second-hand by managers who had new employees who recently had gone through this process.

5.3.3 Bringing Organization Together at One Time

The Vice Presidents and the program directors spoke many times in the interviews of concentrating on the mission of the organization (to serve the neediest population) and giving examples of how this organization is having an impact in the community. One supervisor said, “At the end of the day, the organization, whether one large entity, or many smaller programs, must be able to deliver services.” The drive to coordinate services led to an emphasis many times in the interviews of the “**event**” and the challenge point of bringing the whole organization together. This is quite a feat for an organization that is essentially “24/7.” Before the consolidation, the organization had tried to do this with the annual staff retreat, the holiday party, the awards ceremonies, and the fundraisers. However, these had been done at each of the four organizations. Even as of December, 2005, each of the four organizations held their own holiday party. With such a large consolidated organization, the planning and budgeting necessary for bringing together such a large group took longer to develop, and didn’t happen until June, 2006. Even the Recognition Awards Banquet has to wait until 2007 because of the challenge in recognizing and budgeting for such a large number of people.

There were key **people** who were tasked with bringing the new consolidated organization together all at the same time. The President acknowledged the frustrations of the organization in becoming one entity, and the frustration with the speed of the change, but he also acknowledged that more funding was coming into the organization as a result of the efficiencies that had been created. In the interviews, many people spoke of the need to bring the consolidated organization together at one time. The committee

tasked with doing this had many options, including waiting until December of 2006 for a holiday party, or developing a “program fair,” or waiting for an awards banquet in 2007. Ultimately, it was decided that the Staff Retreat would take place in June, 2006, and workshops and sessions were developed. One of the leaders of this effort spoke of the need to have the group together as one entity, “to bring the growing pains to an end” (field interview, 4/6). She felt that until the group gathered as one entity, the “legacy” organizations would continue to view themselves as together in name, but separate in functions other than those involving central services.

At the Staff Retreat, the President spoke of one donor who had given a large sum of money because “Your organization knows how to stretch that money better than any other organization.” This story, and another told about the organization’s ability to continue providing program services to persons at a shelter that had suffered a serious fire, illustrated, in a collective manner, the **values** that have been brought about with the consolidation. The telling of this particular story by the President is an example of collective understanding of the merger and of the importance of the annual event. Many of the persons interviewed had questioned in their stories whether cost-savings had occurred with the new consolidation, and whether the money really was being put into a “rainy day” fund. The President used the retreat as a forum to affirmatively address these questions.

As the organization united together for the first time, I observed organizational values in play. As Ospina and Dodge (2005, 145) observe, “Socializing two groups into each other’s world requires exchanging tacit knowledge through joint activities – for example, by spending time together or learning together.” By bringing together the

various groups, with each of the groups bringing their own experience, there was an enhanced group experience, which transformed into new group knowledge. I observed an evolving collective sense of meaning associated with the merger, and the coming together once a year was one way to help people to make sense of the ongoing organizational challenges.

Perhaps the strongest value narrative running through the Staff Retreat and the archival documents was the deep desire to run the organization professionally. In giving examples and stories, and reading through the yearbooks and newsletters, the emphasis on the need for professionalism was observed, and appeared to be embedded through all levels of the organization. In many of the interviews, much pride was shown with the certificates on the wall, the length of service tokens, and most importantly, the examples given of the outcomes of the work. Many of the photos displayed on the walls were taken at annual gatherings from the past. The organizers of the Staff Retreat identified the need for overcoming the logistical hurdles for bringing together such a large group, and were able to realize the professional benefits from having the group together (field interviews, 3/15, 3/17, 4/27).

5.4 Development of Model

The three ongoing challenges identified by persons in SSC provide an element of universality across organizations. While most organizations are not dealing with a merger or consolidation, they often are affected by changes within the organization that are brought about by the need for greater efficiencies or economies of scale. The same uncertainty felt by many interviewees regarding reporting lines and vacancies are present

in organizations today. The hiring of new people, and the attempts to bring an organization together, are also universal challenges across organizations. As the stories revealed, many of these challenges are told and retold because there isn't a "final solution" to these problems. There are approaches and tactics that are used to address organizational change, hiring, and communication, but each of these themes running constantly within an organization can be approached with multiple "solutions" or plans.

The collective assignment of meaning to these challenges by members of the organization create a retrospective sensemaking that occurs so that the organization can better understand the challenges, and continue moving forward with making choices in action from the multiple proposed solutions (Weick, 1996). The "sensemaking" process is described by Weick as the creation of reality, which takes shape as an ongoing accomplishment when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves. This sensemaking shapes organizational structure and behavior. Taken jointly, the three challenges incorporate Weick's sensemaking characteristics of being retrospective, enacted in social environments, ongoing, and focused on and extracted from cues.

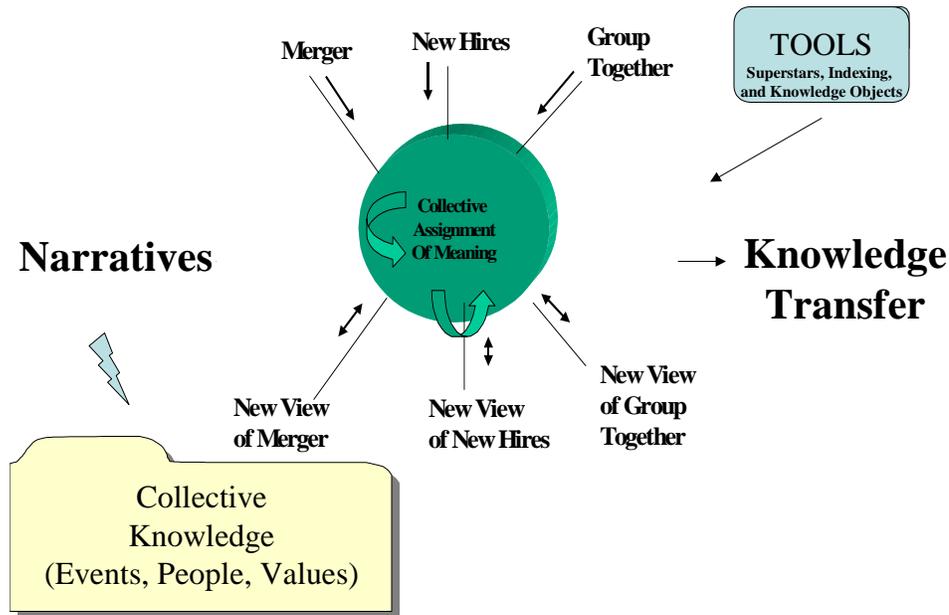
Although the three challenges discussed above are categorized into separate issues, they uniformly relate to how organizations function on a daily basis. The reporting lines, the training of new persons, the communication across the organization, are all elements of how knowledge is transferred in an organization. It is important to note that knowledge can be transferred in organizations in many ways. Narratives are one way that knowledge is transferred. This knowledge, which people have access to in part through the embedded nature of the narratives, takes on evolving meanings as the

narratives are told and retold. This collective assignment of meaning, which is given to the narratives, allows knowledge transfer, because the collective sensemaking then provides an avenue for people to address and work through or with the challenges. In essence, they can continue to get their work done. The three ongoing challenges pose deviations from "normal" routines for SSC members, and require the collective construction of meaning to focus the organization and move on. How participants do this is the primary focus of my research. It is important to note that the types of participants interviewed varied, from board members, to vice presidents, from front-line staff, to supervisors. Although the frequency and focus of the three challenges varied, depending on the role played by the person in the organization, every person interviewed identified the merger as a major challenge, and half of the persons interviewed identified the challenges of bringing in new people and bringing the organization together at one time.

The model below shows how narratives are used to construct a collective understanding of these ongoing challenges that allows people to move on with their work. The model developed below emerged from the research. As first shown in the "Introduction" chapter, the model represents the assignment of meaning within SSC to the three identified organizational challenges, and provides a way to look at knowledge transfer as the collective assignment of meaning by members of an organization. In order to understand the embedded nature of knowledge within SSC, and to follow the "flow" of that knowledge as it was used for knowledge transfer, a knowledge transfer "flow" was observed through the narratives. The model assumes a "flow" that moves across these eight steps:

- 1) Narratives are shared within an organization;
- 2) Narratives express elements of events, people, and values;
- 3) Some narratives have more “sophistication” or “maturity” because of their ongoing dimension, and they can evolve and develop into key organizational challenges;
- 4) The cumulative SSC narratives about organizational challenges reflect common stories and groupings (merger, new people, bringing the group together at one time);
- 5) Narratives of common stories contain and communicate collective knowledge;
- 6) Communication of this collective knowledge allows, within the community, a collective assignment of meaning;
- 7) Certain tools are used to enhance the assignment of meaning (superstars, indexing, and knowledge objects), and help to increase the “absorptive capacity;”
- 8) Knowledge is transferred.

FIGURE ONE: Knowledge Transfer Model



For many of the interviewees, the discussion of the challenges was blended together in an ongoing conversation. For example, when asked about one of the organizational challenges in the last year, most people would mention the merger. From the merger conversation, the conversational flow would shift to reminiscing about “when we did things years ago. . .” which would tie in with how they were brought in years before into the organization, and the conversation should shift again, to more of a wistfulness, identified with statements like, “Now that we’re all one unit, I wish I knew what we looked like.” And, “We’ve gone through so much in the last year, I wish I could see some of these people in their new roles.” (field interviews, 3/15, 4/11). This

threading through of the three challenges, like a loosely woven braid, provided the conversational string for identifying collective meaning.

5.5 Elaborating and Illustrating the Model

It will be helpful to follow the flow of the steps listed above in the model by providing three specific examples. The first example describes a site visit to a full-service satellite center. The second example follows the visit and the interview with one of the “superstars” of the organization, who was referred to by another interviewee as the “Rosetta Stone” of the organization. The last example describes a visit to a service center where both persons interviewed were not seen as one of the “superstars.” This last example is helpful to show that the same stories were circulating in the organization at the periphery of the organization as well as in the circles of the “superstars.” For each of these interviews, I explained that I wanted to have a conversation with them regarding their experiences with SSC, and I told them I would treat them to lunch, and they could pick out the restaurant.

From my initial entry into the organization, I was told, “You have to talk to Katherine,” (not her real name). My point of contact at the organization, as well as eight different interviewees told me the same thing. I had hoped that she would be one of my early interviews, but scheduling proved difficult as the satellite center is not easily accessible, and I was scheduling the interview around the budgeting schedule. By the time I was able to interview her, I had already interviewed twelve other people.

I was provided excellent directions to the center by the secretary, the kind of directions that provide landmarks, such as the Safeway grocery store and the local high

school, and not just streets and directions. With the detail over the phone, and I as I wrote furiously to capture the detail, the secretary said, “We love to have visitors!” My tour of the site began with the intake area, where forms and pamphlets were distributed around the tables. Katherine met me and greeted me warmly, and then continued the tour, with a meeting room and a food pantry. The upstairs held her office, and the office of her “right hand” person, Rachael (not her real name). The three of us met in an empty upstairs office to talk about their length of service with the organizations, and issues that they saw as immediate. In the course of our two-hour conversation, all three challenges were raised as issues that the organization was dealing with. It became clear to me in the first fifteen minutes of the conversation why I had been told numerous times, “You have to talk to Katherine.” Her length of service with the organization, over thirty years, and her positive, upbeat attitude, made her an effective “cheerleader” for the organization. After our conversation in the office, we went to a long lunch at a popular local seafood restaurant. It was at the restaurant that both Katherine and Rachael were open and frank about how the consolidation had affected their work, and what their hopes were for where they would go within the organization. From the site visit and the office conversation, as well as the restaurant conversation, and the follow-up at the Staff Retreat, I was able to establish the “flow” of the narratives that I was told.

Narratives are shared with an organization. Both Katherine and Rachael were able to tell me numerous reasons given by upper management for the merger. For example, Katherine told me about the efficiencies that would be gained from centralizing the hiring process. Rachael told me about the benefits she felt she received from the expanded annual leave schedule. They also provided me with their reasons for why they thought

the merger should move forward. As direct service providers, they both felt that service coordination could be greatly enhanced with the consolidation of the organization. They both felt that they were going to have greater opportunities for advancement with a larger organization. Given Katherine's length of service with the organization, she provided numerous stories of how she was trained in the organization, and she had built on that to develop a better model of training for Rachael. Katherine had been identified by numerous people, from staff to the senior vice president, as one of the "superstars," so I was interested to hear what stories she shared with me regarding the merger that I had previously from other interviewees. I was particularly interested in her "take" on the name change. She was not supportive of the name change, and reflected that the employees had initially been told that the name would not change. However, she did concede that if the name had not been changed, the consolidated organization would never be "one" organization – it would always be seen as four separate organizations, with one being the dominant driver of the group. Katherine wasn't surprised that she was viewed as a "superstar," and felt that it was her years of experience that lend her that credibility.

Narratives express elements of events, people, and values. The stories shared at the restaurant were rich in details about promotions, education vs. experience, a serious concern expressed about training, descriptions of awards that Katherine had won were provided by Rachael, and when I asked both of them, "Why do you stay," they both said "We have a deep commitment to the people we serve and we work with." To illustrate the struggle with the education vs. experience pull in the organization, Rachael told me about wanting to be promoted into a new position. She lacked the education experience

to apply, but had been serving in and “acting” capacity for the position for over a year. She felt it was “quite ironic that I ended up spending months training the person who was hired to do the job I had been doing for over a year,” (field interview, 3/31). All of these stories provide an element of the events, the people and the values within the organization.

Some narratives have more “sophistication” or “maturity” because of their ongoing dimension, and they evolve and develop into key organizational challenges. Since I had already interviewed twelve people before I interviewed Katherine and Rachael, many of the stories they were telling me I had already heard. I was aware of the name change concern, my schedule of interviews had been affected by the new budgeting system roll-out, and I had been told about past attempts by the organization to gather everyone together. The restaurant provided an intimate setting to verify that these themes were, indeed, forefront on Katherine and Rachael’s minds, and that the major challenges had been a part of the organization for quite some time, some even years. Katherine’s experience in the past with budgeting systems had provided her with an “indexing” system to understand what elements the new system was trying to capture, specifically, how to code the various “cost centers” with the four-digit codes they had used for years instead of the 9-digit codes that the new system was requiring. Since Katherine was “a good friend” of the information technology expert, she had called her friend to ask if the “short-cut” could be used, and her friend had assured her that the system would run with the “short-cut.” This example shows the importance of knowing the right questions to ask (indexing), and knowing the right person to ask (a “superstar” had many connections).

The cumulative SSC narratives about organizational challenges reflect common stories and groupings. Within each interview, there were stories that were documented, but that weren't repeated elsewhere – for example, issues of a break in service and how to credit it correctly, or an issue with how the food pantry inventory was being documented. These types of stories, though interesting, did not attain a cumulative effect so as to rise to a major organizational challenge or grouping. However, the day spent at the satellite center, and the conversation over lunch did provide support that the organizational challenges that were beginning to “bubble to the top” with my interviews, were, indeed, common stories and could be grouped collectively.

Narratives of common stories contain and communicate collective knowledge. In the parking lot after our lunch, I was casually talking with Rachael, and she said, “I know we've griped about the merger, but in the long run, it will be better for everyone.” I was surprised to hear her say “griped” because their comments of it being inevitable, and being cumbersome had not struck me as “gripping.” However, when I had asked her earlier what made Katherine such a great boss, she had said, “Her compassion, enthusiasm, and wits.” And I realized how important enthusiasm and a positive attitude were to do their jobs. Additionally, the stories both of them told me about the roll-out of the new budgeting system were stories that I had been hearing already, but both highlighted the forecasting value that the system would have. The collective knowledge created around the forecasting function of the new budgeting system was slowly taking on more importance and emphasis in the months that I continued my interviewing.

Communication of this collective knowledge allows, within the community, a collective assignment of meaning. As Katherine was describing her concerns about the

merger, her words told me that she had been having ongoing conversations with others who were similarly affected and concerned: “When I talked with the other managers. . .” and “We’ve discussed this with others who agree. . .” and “We thought it wouldn’t change. . .”

Certain tools are used to enhance the assignment of meaning (superstars, indexing, and knowledge objects) and help to increase the “absorptive capacity.” My interview with Katherine and Rachael initially honed in to these three tools as the way meaning was assigned. Katherine definitely served in the role of the superstar, both Katherine and Rachael were adept at indexing, or cataloging, a story or event, and using it or applying it on recall, as part of the knowledge transfer process. The organizational theory research tends to call this action “lessons learned,” but these indexes, or stored stories, are the knowledge that is used for action by the persons in the organization. Our lunch-time conversation showed this with Katherine and Rachael as one story led to another story and, at one point, they were almost completing each other’s sentences. They have worked closely together for over seven years, and have become skillful at using their tools to complement each other’s working style. Katherine was a major keeper of the organization’s “knowledge objects” providing me a bag filled with previous yearbooks, newsletters, and photos of awards she had won in the past. She also identified the unofficial “archivist” for the organization, a woman who, she said, “Saved everything, even the napkins from the awards banquets!” The “archivist’s” ability to index provided a two-fold function in the organization – she was able to remember the experiences from years back where certain procedures had been tried, and she was able to help forecast how new procedures might unfold based on previous experience.

Knowledge is transferred. During our lunchtime conversation, there were two key points where I could see that Rachael, the younger of the women, reflected on something Katherine had said and stated, “I never realized that” and “I never thought about that.” The first instance came when I asked Katherine why she hadn’t retired yet – after all, she has over 30 years of service with the organization, and possibly has the age. Katherine’s replied that she has good days and bad days, but there isn’t day that she goes home that she doesn’t feel like she’s done something good for someone else, and that means she’s done something good for herself. The other instance involved the conversation about bringing the organization together, and Katherine stated, “I know it would be expensive, but it sure would be worth it.” By having the interviews side-by-side during a casual lunch, a synergy was built between these two women that would have been noticeably absent had I interviewed them separately back at the office.

The second example that follows the “flow” of knowledge as it moves through an organization involves my interview with the organization’s “Rosetta Stone” who I will call Monica. The “Rosetta Stone” signifies a critical key that is needed to decipher a difficult problem. Monica had been mentioned three times by previous interviewees, and my interview lunch with her was set up after I had interviewed 7 people. Monica provided follow-up information to me after the Staff Retreat. We first met in the lobby in SSC; I had invited her to lunch, and she met me downstairs with her coat, ready to go eat. She chose a nearby café, and we were seated at a small table. Since we had just met, and we were at a table, I initially chose not to jot down notes during this conversation. Once dessert arrived, I asked her if I could take a few notes, and she agreed.

After our interview, I retreated to a local library and wrote down as much from our conversation as I could remember. Our conversation at lunch time flowed smoothly, and after lunch, she invited me up to her office. She introduced me to four people who she supervises, and she ended up introducing me to an additional other five people since she had locked her keys in her office and needed to find someone who had the master key. This key hunt allowed for more relaxed conversation with her, and allowed me to pop in on two of the people who I had interviewed the previous week, one of whom had recommend that I talk to Monica. The stories that were raised during our lunch time together can also trace through the steps in the model :

Narratives are shared within an organization. The stories that were told to me during this lunchtime conversation revolved around how she came to work at the organization, how her work has affected her life, the role that accreditation will have on the organization, the name change brought about by the consolidation, and lots of time on other people in the organization who she thinks are valuable and why.

Narratives express elements of events, people, and values. All of the stories mentioned above include an event, they include people, and the stories she chose to share express certain values. Monica was extremely supportive of the merger and felt that the organization had already benefited immensely from the consolidation. Her role in one of the administrative functions was one of the early functions to come together. By the time of our interview, she was already able to see the impact the merger had on her work. Monica's specialty in human resources made her an excellent source for identifying key people in the organization – she was especially helpful at identifying the “superstars” and given reasons many other had for the why these individuals were “superstars.”

Some narratives have more “sophistication” or “maturity” because of their ongoing dimension, and they evolve and develop into key organizational challenges. During the two hours that we spent at lunch and afterward, the stories that Monica included in our conversation contained an aspect of key organizational challenges. There were a couple of other stories that didn’t develop a certain “sophistication” or “maturity” – these included a story about raising money to give to an organization in her home country, and a discussion of a book that she liked.

The cumulative SSC narratives about organizational challenges reflect common stories and groupings (merger, new people, bringing the group together at one time). The two major challenges discussed during this interview involved the new people and bringing the group together. Some people are more comfortable talking about other people than others, and I hit the gold-mine with this interviewee. The office that Monica supervises was tasked with putting on the Staff Retreat, and she provided many stories of expectations, past successes, and what to anticipate.

Narratives of common stories contain and communicate collective knowledge. The stories that Monica told about the accreditation process and staff retreat contained information that was echoed by other interviewees, both before and after her interview.

Communication of this collective knowledge allows, within the community, a collective assignment of meaning. The meaning that was assigned to the accreditation process revolved around a desire to run the organization more professionally. The meaning assigned to the Staff Retreat involved a strong desire from all levels to hold the event, and have the event run smoothly.

Certain tools are used to enhance the assignment of meaning (superstars, indexing, and knowledge objects), and help to increase the “absorptive capacity.” This interview also allowed me to observe the three tools that are helpful in assigning meaning. Monica is an organizational superstar, she has an excellent indexing ability, and her stories included references to newsletters, yearbook, a clock given as a award, and strong web references.

Knowledge is transferred. As a “superstar” in the organization, Monica is aware of her “sway” in the organization and values her position. The stories she communicated to me during our lunch interview, and the meaning she assigned to these stories, were repeated to me by six subsequent interviewees.

The last example that illustrates the model involved the visit to one of the service centers that provides intensive case management and services, and well as housing to homeless men. I arrived at the center in mid-day, when the center was mostly empty of participants. During the day, the homeless men are required to leave unless they are scheduled for a group session at the center. Most of the men are applying or working at various job sites, or are receiving supportive services at the organization’s other centers. My first interview was with John (not his real name), an employee who had come to the organization as a program participant. My second interview was with Michael (not his real name), who has a Master’s degree in Social Work (MSW), and who has been with the organization almost five years and is very involved with the accreditation process.

Narratives are shared within an organization. John told me the story about his experience in the organization. He came into the organization as a program participant; because of his experience on the other side of the service delivery, the believed he was

more effective at helping persons who were now program participants. He told me the story about the person hired with a Master's of Social Work (MSW) who worked at the organization no longer than a month. He told me "There's no replacing experience in this line of work." When I asked him about the name change to the organization, he seemed pretty nonchalant about the change, "I guess they had to do it." My interview with Michael right after the interview with John was interesting because of their very different views on education and the name change. Since Michael came into the organization with a Master's degree, he placed greater emphasis on the education of the employee rather than the experience. Neither of the interviewees was derogatory about the level of expertise of the other, but each felt that their knowledge that they brought into the organization was what helped them be successful in the organization. Michael was more retrospective about the name change; he carried two business cards with him – one with the old name, and one with the new name. The stories that they told me in the interviews, even though the interviews were conducted separately, were known to the other, since they had worked together for almost three years. Michael had more stories that carried the "official story" of the organization since he attends more accreditation meetings and is involved in more steering committees.

Narratives express elements of events, people, and values. The stories that John and Michael told me about the name change and how each of them had been brought into the organization highlighted aspects of events, people, and values. John told me a story about Katherine, and when she had won special recognition from the organization. He pulled out an old yearbook, and showed me the picture of her being presented the award. This story was a story about an event (Katherine won a special recognition award), it was

a story about a person (Katherine, already identified earlier as a “superstar,”) and it was a story about a value (John was telling me the story to illustrate why he liked the organization, especially people who he had worked with in the past and had encouraged him, highlighting the professionalism in the organization).

Some narratives have more “sophistication” or “maturity” because of their ongoing dimension, and they can evolve and develop into key organizational challenges. John and Michael both told me the story about being brought into the organization, John with his long experience of rising through the ranks, and Michael with his educational background. Although each was aware of how their individual experience had served them well in the organization, both were aware of the emphasis being pushed toward more educational experience given the pressures of accreditation.

The cumulative SSC narratives about organizational challenges reflect common stories and groupings (merger, new people, bringing the group together at one time). The interview at this organization showed me the presence of the three challenges, but with a different emphasis. Both John and Michael were very interested in talking about bringing new people into the organization, and both shared stories of bringing the group together and how challenging that was, but their stories were more limited regarding the merger. Since this center is more at the direct service delivery center, and their workload is so demanding, it is likely that they haven’t spent much time talking about the impact of the merger. Neither of them was directly responsible for the budgeting or the hiring function, so the impact of the merger, besides the name change, seemed minimal.

Narratives of common stories contain and communicate collective knowledge. The emphasis by the organization on accreditation has directed the hiring question to

focus more on the educational level of the new employees. The collective knowledge that is being communicated to the organization's employees, and that was communicated to me through the interviews reflected an understanding that educational experience is valuable, but that there is also a need to "value" the hands-on experience that many of the current employees have.

Communication of this collective knowledge allows, within the community, a collective assignment of meaning. Since Michael is working on the accreditation committee, and since he is well aware of the experience that his co-worker, John, brings to the organization, he has worked to increase the collective knowledge that the others on the committee have regarding the drive to hire more educationally qualified persons. He has also worked with the organization to help implement and provide incentives for current employees who have valuable hands-on experience to gain more education through web-based training and short-term educational opportunities.

Certain tools are used to enhance the assignment of meaning (superstars, indexing, and knowledge objects), and help to increase the "absorptive capacity." The accreditation committee has on its membership, the "Rosetta Stone" mentioned above. The value of the "superstar" for helping to assign meaning was identified by Michael. He said, "If Monica knows how important the experience of these people are, she'll make it know to the higher-ups."

Knowledge is transferred. Although the issue of how to value education vs. experience has not been resolved in the organization, it is a story that continues to circulate in the "traffic circles" so that more people are aware that it is an issue, and more people can seek information about this challenge to help inform and transfer that

knowledge to the ultimate decision-makers, in this case, the accreditation committee and the human resources personnel.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I discussed the recurring narratives across the organization that were used to construct a collective understanding of the ongoing challenges in the organization. The collective meaning that was assigned to the challenges by the organization then allowed people to understand the issues, and develop ways of working with them. The research challenge was to understand the meanings that were derived through narratives, and how the narratives and their meanings were assigned and used in an organization. In this chapter, I described the three organizational challenges that were followed in the organization: 1) the challenge of merging into one large organization out of four smaller ones; 2) the challenge of bringing new people into the organization; and 3) the challenge of bringing the newly merged organization together at one time. The chapter showed the model used for assigning meaning.

In looking at this model, the focus point, or point of intersection, is where the stories come together in what I will discuss in the next chapter as the “traffic circle,” so that as the stories are told and retold, the participants begin to collectively assign meaning to these stories, and then, as they move away from the “traffic circle,” they have a new view of the challenge that helps them cope with, or have a better understanding of, the tension, and they can then make sense of the organizational challenges. The “traffic circle,” also known as a “roundabout” in the United States, provides an interesting way

for an organization to come together and keep moving, without actually having to stop, and this ability to come together with stories, and merge the stories together, develops into a richer understanding of the challenges that are being merged. The retrospective element that is provided by the “traffic circle” allows the organization to cope with its challenges in a more informed and professional manner.

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss how the organizational narratives are engaged, and how the engagement of the narratives helped persons in SSC cope with their challenges. The discussion will address how the narratives are used to solve problems. Additionally, I will look at the point of intersection between the narratives and the collective assignment of meaning, and the final section of the chapter will explain how the knowledge transfer facilitators help to assign meaning to the narratives. For the analysis, and in order to follow the “flow” of a narrative that is embedded and situated in the organization, I will take the “value” of “professionalism” raised by numerous interviewees, and follow this concept of professionalism as it was presented in each of the ongoing organizational challenges.

6.2 Intersection of Narratives and Challenges

The knowledge transfer model identified in the previous chapter described the telling of the narratives within an organization, and the collective meaning that was assigned to the challenges. This intersection between the narratives and challenges looks similar to a “traffic circle” where issues come together, as they come together and are told and retold, the group collectively assigns meaning to them, and then these narratives, which reflect the newly assigned meaning, can be used within the organization for future challenges. The “traffic circle” figure illustrates the collective assignment of meaning.

The follow-up interviews with key five people provided the most in-depth discussion of the meaning assigned to address the challenges in the organization. Although the challenges introduced and discussed by the members of the organization are ongoing issues, there was a certain state of “closure” that came from viewing the challenges initially, and then from the perspective of “this is where we are now.” The old-time Polaroid photographs provide a glimpse at what the process of collective meaning looks like. When a Polaroid picture is taken, the paper is peeled back, and the image is completely blurred – only the blended colors come through. But, with time and patience, the photograph begins to take shape in front of our eyes, and edges and lines become more distinct. After several minutes, the photograph has finished developing, and the person looking at this photo has a clear two-dimensional view of what was taken. As persons in an organization are trying to collectively understand the challenges they are facing, the “picture” in front of them becomes clearer, and the members arrive at a collective understanding of a three-dimensional problem. However, this doesn’t just happen spontaneously. In order to have the photograph “develop,” or the challenges to be clearer, the stories have to be engaged, and this is the function of the “traffic circle.”

The following discussion identifies knowledge transfer as a collective, interactive process, and shows how narratives were used as a means to explain knowledge transfer in SSC. The model below shows that as narratives are told and retold, in the “traffic circle,” these stories are collectively assigned meaning. Although the term “roundabout” is more common in the United States, the function of the “traffic circle” is to keep the traffic flowing smoothly and merging so that interactions can occur, but it doesn’t require a complete “stop,” like with a traffic light at an intersection. In order to successfully

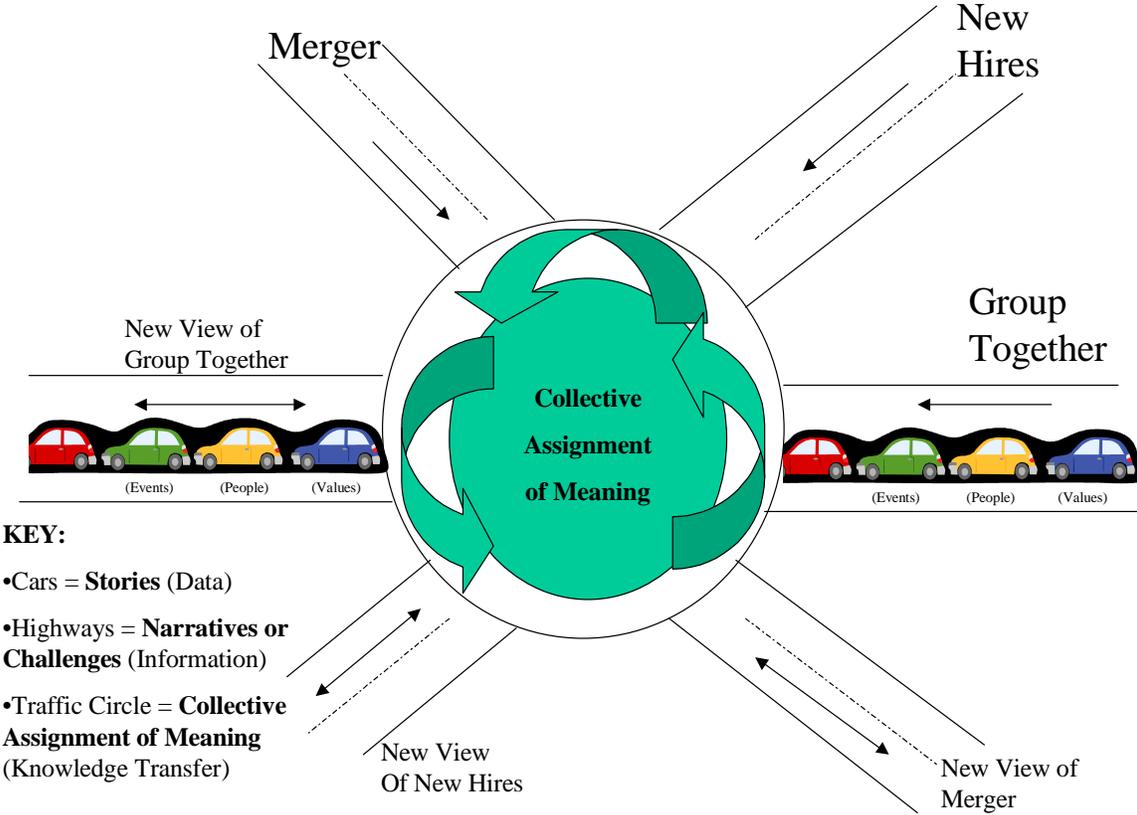
navigate a “traffic circle” or “roundabout,” one must be familiar with the rules of yielding, merging, and who has the right of way.

Essentially, a tension exists within the organization that is borne out by each of the three challenges. The organization made a decision to merge, and part of the rationale for the merger was to provide better-coordinated professional services to the community. Although rationally the interviewees understood the reasons for the merger, their discussions and observations showed that there was still “a long way to go” to get the coordination that was envisioned. This tension between what was expected and what was actually happening in the organization will be discussed below with each of the organizational challenges. Although the tension in these challenges were presented in varied ways by the interviewees, each was determined to be a major organizational challenge by the multiple iterations of the stories told about the challenges, and the evolutionary nature of the challenges as something dynamic and ongoing within the organization.

The purpose of the tension is to bring these concerns together, in the “traffic circle” where they can be mulled over, and looked at from different angles, and as they are discussed, the sensemaking, or understanding of meaning takes place, and the participants go away from the “traffic circle” with a new view of each of the challenges. This new, or revised, view of each of the challenges is the point where knowledge is transferred in the organization. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Literature Review, this “traffic circle” allows for an effective group process to occur, not by supplanting “my

idea with yours,” but by “harmonizing differences through interpenetration,” (Follett, 1924).

FIGURE TWO: Collective Meaning Assigned in Traffic Circle



In the “traffic circle” above, the “cars” represent the stories that are told within the organization about or related to various challenges. The challenges are represented by the roads, or highways, that come into the center, or the “traffic circle.” When the members of the organization are telling their stories, these stories can be told about a challenge as a story about the particular event, or people, or values, and these are the types of “cars” that are traveling the highways. It is possible, however, that some of the

cars that enter have no purposeful focus on the challenges, but they can be picked up and used as applicable. The point where extra attention is required, and the crux of this dissertation, is what happens when these stories about the challenges come together in the “traffic circle?” As this chapter will show, the collective meaning that is assigned to each of these challenges then allows the tension to be eased, and a clearer understanding of the challenge develops, and this is the point where knowledge transfer happens. The use of the “traffic circle” to represent knowledge transfer is a metaphor drawn from the work of Gareth Morgan’s (1986) *Images of Organization*, and this metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing the organization that pervades how we know and understand the organization.

The “traffic circle” thus represents a way for the organization to bring their stories together to a “centralized” location so that the telling and retelling of these stories allows the uncertainties and ambiguities of the organization to diminish. With the added information and sensemaking that occurs in the “traffic circle,” the organization is able to approach the challenge with more clarity and professionalism. This model is a way to understand the sensemaking taking place in the organization. People may not view the process as a “traffic circle,” but the “traffic circle” provides a model for understanding the role of narratives as sensemaking vehicles in the organization. For many of the interviewees, the value of the “traffic circle” comes from its retrospective function. In describing each of the challenges, the stories that were told tended to provide an element of anticipation, participation, and then reflection. Each of the challenges, in essence, tell a chronology that shows before, during, and after, and this is captured in the “traffic circle” as journeying toward the circle (anticipation), entering and circling around the

circle (participation), and leaving the circle with added knowledge (reflection). The reflection aspects of the stories that were told in the interviews, and the participation in the “traffic circle” with the organizational challenges brought forward another phenomena that were born out in the stories that will be discussed below. It is of importance to note that not all stories actually enter the “traffic circle.”

Some stories may be of a personal nature, and these stories veer off in another direction before they actually enter the “circle.” Other stories may enter the “circle” but because there aren’t enough people “driving” these stories, they enter and leave without any meaning assigned to them. And other stories may enter on one “highway” but as they enter the “traffic circle,” they may be assigned meaning to another “highway” or challenge. The “energy” that pushes these stories to the middle, or the center, is created by the telling and retelling of the stories, so that they create the narratives. This research does not attempt to categorize all of the stories that are told in an organization. This research collected common stories, and then found cumulatively common narratives, or challenges, and then looked at how these challenges were assigned meaning. It is important to note that the model above illustrates one traffic circle; that does not mean that only one circle is present and active in an organization. It is possible that an organization has many “traffic circles” operating at one time, and may have one centralized circle that is fed by the smaller circles. But the circles do illustrate the importance of “location” and physically being able to participate in a “circle.” Because of the participation of certain persons on various committees in the organization, they have the ability to actively participate in various “traffic circles.” Their “geography” or their “propinquity” allows a more active ability to collectively assign meanings in the

traffic circles. There are many organizations that may attempt to control the “cars” that enter the “traffic circle” so that only ones with certain messages, either positive or negative, are circulating or being discussed.

Although the challenges within the organization created tensions and ambiguities, the stories that were told in this organization tended to be “positive” in nature. As I mentioned in the methodology chapter, my interviews were not recorded, and the possibilities for “griping” or “venting” were present for the interviewees. However, as the challenges were discussed, the stories that were told reflected a pragmatic approach to the challenge, as more of a description, or more of reflection that is brought on with the wisdom of experience. Even when discussing the uncertain turbulent times of merging, the stories were told as one talks about growth, or perseverance, or determination. In the examples below, I will describe how the collective meaning was given to each of the challenges, and the stories that were told during the interviews will illustrate the retrospective understanding that was brought about by actively being able to participate in the “traffic circle” that is organizationally composed of sharing narratives. The collective assignment of meaning to each of the challenges is illustrated in the “traffic circle” model as a flow, or something that happens over time, so that as the new meaning is assigned, the stories can continue to circulate within the circle, or the stories can move out and come back in with new meaning.

6.2.1 Collective Meaning Assigned to Merger

The consolidation of the organization has created new problems for the organization. Many of these problems were anticipated before the merger took place, and

several persons spoke of the “angst” that they felt before the merger began (field notes, 3/15, 4/6). The problem many people spoke of was the “headquarters focus vs. programs focus.” With one large, centralized entity, there is ongoing work needed to balance the information needs of headquarters with the service delivery demands by the various satellite entities. The organization is currently focusing on standards accreditation, which necessitates many reporting documents from each of the service providers. Peters and Armstrong (1998, 75) explain, “Collaboration means that people labor together in order to construct something that did not exist before the collaboration, something that does not and cannot fully exist in the lives of individual collaborators.” This concept of collaboration is used elsewhere in descriptions of “synergy,” or, in the usage of the metaphor of jazz improvisation, to explain group innovation (Weick, 1998). Boje’s (1991) work identifies narratives as a preferred mode for managers to use in these types of collaborative or “sensemaking” activities.

By using the event narratives related to the consolidation of the organization, I was able to identify the assignment of meaning to this major event at many levels. Initially, people were concerned about the merger because, “we didn’t know what the new organization would look like” (field interview, 2/28). In fact, research on mergers shows that one of the primary causes for failure of mergers is the cultural clash that results from bringing the groups together (Carleton & Lineberry, 2004). Additionally, it wasn’t clear whether this merger was to create one large organization, or four entities that were “stapled together” in their organizational flow charts (field observations, 3/17, 3/31, 4/6).

There wasn't consistent language related to the merger. In various interviews, the merger was referred to as a consolidation, an acquisition, a combination, the joining together, a restructuring, one interviewee even referred to it as "an amalgamation of groups" (field interview, 3/8). Before the kick-off event to announce the consolidation of the organizations, a "Questions and Answers" document was developed. One of the questions in this document asked, "Why is this called a reorganization instead of a merger?" (SSC White Paper, 10/05). The answer stated, "A merger would have implied that all of the agencies were being melded into a new agency, while losing the unique identities of each. Instead, we are joining together to create a new corporation, Social Services for the Community. Each division will retain its unique services, programs, relationships, identity and mission within the new organizational structure." Even though this answer was included in the "Q & A" document from July, 2004, during my interviews in 2006, many managers insisted that the consolidation was actually a merger. In the March, 2006, PowerPoint presentation that was used for smaller groups, the Board of Directors, and more "town hall" meetings referred to the merging as a "restructuring" of the organization.

Having no clear language to identify the action taking place with the entities only lent to confusion and some mistrust as to the outcome of the action. With more than a year into the consolidation, and most of the organizational energy devoted to central services, I observed through source documents (White Paper, 08/05 and PowerPoint presentation 03/06) and from interviews (field notes, 3/31, 4/27, 5/3, 5/10) that very little work has been given to program integration to avoid duplication of services. For example, medical services were still being provided by many of the organizations, and

food services were still being done by most of the entities (field interviews, 3/31, 5/3). For reporting purposes, divisional and regional managers are acutely aware of the merger, but besides the change in name, persons at the programmatic staff level have felt almost no change to their daily work (field notes, 3/8, 3/15, 3/17, 4/27). For example, two interviewees talked about attending a fundraising event for the newly merged organization, and were “corrected” on the organization’s name by long-time funders who still identified their giving with the original name (field notes, 3/17, 4/6).

However, in reflecting on the progress of the merger, many people felt that the “growing pains” were almost over by pointing out the organization’s ability to recruit new hires into key management positions from the private sector. Although several of these individuals took huge pay cuts to come work for the organization, their reputation and experience brought in a renewed “breath of fresh air” right at a time that the organization needed it the most (field interview, 4/6). One seasoned employee, speaking of a new managerial hire said, “I can’t believe we really got him! Who knew he would give up his private sector gig and come for work us!” (field interview, 4/6). The placement of this key managerial hire was a critical turning point identified by many interviewees for proceeding with the consolidation of additional functions (field notes, 4/6, 4/11, 5/17). Others mentioned the professional skills of many of their managers, with their excellent legal and accounting expertise. One person commented on his supervisor, “He could make so much more out in the private sector. I hope he won’t be wooed away” (field interview, 4/27). This desire to capture new people with “highly professional” skills, and retain the ones already in place, was repeated many times in the interviews (field notes, 3/17, 3/31, 4/27). Part of the collective assignment of meaning

that is taking place is focusing on the quality of new hires as a positive transition point for the new organization. The stories of the new hires are circulating in the “traffic circle,” but they are being “plucked out” and assigned to the challenge of the merger.

I was able to observe the effects of change on the new organization as it had to alter one of its major administrative professional functions. In the time that I was doing my interviews, the organization was implementing a new budgeting system. Although other functions, such as payroll and hiring, had been centralized into the one new organization, the challenge of creating one budget with similar coding categories proved to be a tremendous functional learning curve for each level of the organization. In order to implement the new system, a mandatory training was held for the program directors. In order to submit a budget, each program director was required to learn the new coding structures and enter these numbers, with a very short turn-around time. The training was an attempt at uniform integration of a functional process. In the context of my research, it was initially seen as a tool to embed a knowledge transfer flow across the organization. However, the formal attempt was circumnavigated by many of the interviewees with an informal network of contacts.

Several of my interviews needed to be postponed as the directors attended to the urgent issue of providing the numbers in the new budgeting system. I followed up with two of the persons who had been interviewed during this stressful time, and asked them how they had adapted during the reporting period. Both of them spoke of the importance of the information technology personnel to help them adapt to the new system. This isn't surprising, since O'Dell (1998) notes, “It is no coincidence that information technology has blossomed at the same time that knowledge is becoming recognized as the most

valuable of a firm's asset. We have grown to covet even more access to information and other people's knowledge."

The interviewees also relied heavily on their web of knowledge to ascertain what deadlines were truly "set in stone" and which ones could be altered. Many persons spoke of the benefit the new forecasting system would be once all the data was entered by the various "cost centers," but the demanding turn-around time for numbers, and the inability to upload the information even after it was entered, meant that the interviewee had to rely on a web of knowledge already in place. Given the unsettled nature of the consolidation, the narratives described to me during the interviews provided a unification factor to organize "temporal experiences into meaningful wholes" (Glover, 2004). The stories about budgeting accomplished two things. One is the navigation of the budget process, a crucial part of making sense of the merger. The other is the role of narratives more broadly, in transferring knowledge outside of the formalized processes.

Even with the budgetary woes, more reflection was provided by other interviewees who talked about how they were won over by the consolidation when they saw their leave days grow (field notes, 3/8, 3/15, 3/29). Though not an intentional "bone" thrown to the employees, the action to combine the four personnel systems, and bring the best from each, created a bridge for many people who were ambivalent about the consolidation (field interview 5/17). The planning team in charge of structuring the consolidation felt that it was necessary to provide an "early victory" to the employees (White Paper, 08/05). By focusing on the vacation days for all employees, the organization was able to roll out a positive "first step" in the consolidation (field interview, 5/17).

The frustration felt by many employees when the consolidation was introduced was displaced by a greater understanding for the need to consolidate. For example, one employee had worked at the organization for over ten years and was fearful of a new leave structure that wouldn't take into account his years of service (field interview, 3/29). However, once the new leave was rolled out, he said he had more vacation time that was his to take, instead of some of the Federal holidays. As more employees gained the new vacation/leave benefits, they came to support the consolidation. Some said that this recognition made them feel more "professional" and that their needs were being taken into account (field interviews, 3/15, 3/29, Staff Retreat – 6/7).

One of the benefits of the larger organization for many of the persons interviewed has been the possibility of shifting positions, either laterally or as a promotion, within the newly consolidated organization. In speaking with persons who had been with the organization more than ten years, one of the strengths of the organization that they identified was their desire to keep working at SSC because they could shift into other jobs if they needed a new challenge, and they were able to rise through the ranks quickly (field notes, 3/31, 4/6, 5/10). This was revealed by several interviewees as they walked me through their employment history with the organization (field notes, 3/8, 3/17, 3/31, 4/27). This ability to move up or laterally within the organization was identified and assigned a positive meaning by the persons in the organization, and was seen as a benefit of the merger, as well as a tool for recruiting new hires and retaining current employees.

With the doubling of the organization, I was able to hear many stories during the interviews of persons who had been given new opportunities in the consolidated structure. For example, one person, who just three years ago was working as a case

worker, was now the shelter director (field notes, 3/8). Another person, who had been brought on as a secretary four years ago, was now coordinating the food distribution for six shelters (field notes, 3/31). Many of the persons interviewed had taken on a new position, or a new title, or had changed positions in the last two years (field notes, 2/28, 3/29, 3/31, 4/27). This “hindsight” reflection by these individuals revealed that they hoped the consolidation would provide these kinds of opportunities, and they were relieved that many had benefited from these opportunities. This was seen by many as a chance and opportunity to grow professionally, and because of this, the merger was viewed by several people differently. Where they originally were frustrated with the uncertainties in the organization, the larger organization, with its size for advancement, was now viewed as “a reason to stay” (field interview, 3/29).

In the midst of the merger, there was a facilitating group brought in to help with the logistics of the merger. The group changed while the merging was still unfolding. This change was identified as creating a tremendous “amount of lost energy for the organization” (field interview, 3/17). As persons have told and retold the story of how the merger took place, they identified the importance of having a singular group lead the effort to maintain the focus and energy of the group. The merger was described as “a slowly developing storm. . . everyone knew it was coming, but not sure where it was going to hit and what would happen,” (White Paper, 10/05). Additionally, there was weariness in the telling of the merger by many of the interviewees. One manager identified the merging process as “painfully slow” and many others said, “There were too many things changing at once” and “There was just too much going on.” (field interviews, 3/8, 3/17, 4/6).

The collective meaning assigned to the pace of the merger showed that people were frustrated with how long it took to make some changes, and then once a decision was made, the decision had to be implemented immediately. The delays in hiring key people “were a lost opportunity to give stability and direction to the merger,” (White Paper, 10/05). Many people wished for more “forecasting” ability in the organization, and felt “incredible reporting angst” about systems that needed quick implementation (field interview 3/31). For example, one interviewee told me about being asked to give a budget report by Friday afternoon, but she only got the message on Thursday morning (field interview, 3/17). She said, “It would not be a problem with the old system, I could punch in a couple of keystrokes and send them their report.” However, with the new system, the ability to generate reports quickly was several months away, and yet the need for these reports was urgent for the “roll-out.” At a different site, another interviewee recounted her embarrassment at having to cancel our interview twice because her supervisor kept giving her only a day’s notice of a mandatory budgetary request which would coincide with our scheduled appointments (field interview, 4/27). These stories illustrated the intense pressures and tension felt by people as changes were being implemented, but reflected an understanding in hindsight for the benefits of the changes. By talking about the merger, and the reporting requirements attached to the merger, these interviewees were able to move to a common point of understanding toward the merger, and were able to see the professional opportunities that the larger agency provided (field notes, 3/8, 3/17, 3/31, 4/27).

The examples above illustrate the ongoing tension that still exists within the organization of wanting the merger to be complete, but having only parts of the

organization truly merged as one. The narratives related to the challenge of truly merging reflected an optimism that coordination was improving, but observations of processes in place, and interviews with managers showed that the merger was complete at the human resources level, but the area of program integration was going to present a much greater challenge (PowerPoint, 03/06, field notes, 3/31, 4/27, Staff Retreat – 6/7). These examples also illustrate the interrelatedness of the challenges, with stories beginning to tell about the merger, and yet emphasizing later the value of professionalism. The interviewees attempted to reconcile the direction that the organization was hoping to move in, with the unease and ambiguity that continued for many months into the consolidation. Although the organization had hoped to move quickly with the reorganization (White Paper, 08/05), the reality was that many vice-presidents and managers left, leaving the reporting lines uncertain. In the end, this proved beneficial to many of the persons who I interviewed because they had been given opportunities to rise in the organization with the vacancies available. The stories told by the interviewees identified a cumulative effect from the organizational narratives, so that as the stories and narratives came together and were told and retold, the challenges took on new meanings, and people were able to take these new meanings to help them deal with the challenges.

6.2.2 Collective Meaning Assigned to New Employees

As a result of the merger, the organization must address the accreditation requirement. For the organization, this means that it will need to address the challenge of hiring and promoting based on experience and education. Many of the employees in the

organization were original recipients of the social services. These “para-professionals” bring on-the-job and real-world experience to the profession, but may lack the educational requirements. As the organization continues to expect more reporting functions from the employees in order to meet accreditation and funding requirements, which are linked to their ability to obtain Federal and state funding, many of these para-professionals are feeling a shift in their time commitments to focus more on computer time instead of service delivery time. This was told to me by both supervisors and paraprofessionals (field notes, 3/8, 3/17, 3/29, 3/31, 4/27), and was noted as a source of tension for them. The publications for the organization, including the Annual Reports and the quarterly newsletter, include the symbol of accreditation on the back of the documents.

Several interviewees reported that they were not very good with computers, and felt more comfortable with people (field notes, 3/8, 3/29, 3/31). The tension they experienced in their professional environment related to more and more of their work day requiring reports that needed to be completed on the computer (field notes, 3/8, 3/31). This “tug-of-war” between paper and people was an ongoing tension that was expressed often when people were describing how they had been brought into the organization. Part of the challenge of rising up into the organization was the shift of responsibilities to more reporting and less time with people (field notes, 3/8, 3/29, 3/31). Two of the people who I interviewed spoke about the pride they felt at being able to “climb the organization’s ladder” and yet the price they felt they paid to do this was being farther away from the people who they enjoyed working for, (field notes, 3/31, 4/27). As one manager put it, “You sure have a better view up here, but you sure miss having the ‘eye-

level' contact," (field interview, 3/17). As these stories were told in the interviews, the collective assignment of meaning that was giving to this shift in responsibilities showed a concession that these types of trade-offs needed to be made, but I also observed a wistfulness in the descriptions of how much of their time had been spent "actually helping people," (field interview, 3/31).

The values described in the narratives also included a deep sense of loyalty to the organization. Although many people mentioned a concern with their salary and pay scale, an ongoing point of contention for persons in the service industry, there was a commitment on the part of the interviewees to see the consolidation through, and work toward the mission of the organization (field notes, 3/8, 3/15, 3/17, 3/31, 4/27). As an example of the pay, a shelter manager with twenty years of experience in the organization is making around \$28,000 in the District of Columbia (field notes, 3/17). It's likely that persons working in a nonprofit capacity are inherently committed to their work, and come to the calling from a deep sense of conviction. Though loyal and committed to the mission of the organization, many managers were concerned about turnover within the organization, especially for positions requiring a master's of social work (MSW) degree (field notes, 3/8, 3/17, 3/29).

The conversation I had with a shelter director highlighted the importance of "real-world" experience compared to "book knowledge" when it came to keeping persons at that level. The director viewed both types of "knowledge" as necessary to being able to operate professionally and "get the job done" (field interview, 3/8). The tension described between persons with various skills was one acutely evident from the Board of Directors all the way down to the shelter directors (field notes, 3/8, 3/29). As many

interviewees recounted the tension between the “old days” and “new days,” part of their concern was the uncertainty of valued skills, from an organization that had traditionally placed high value and professionalism on very “real-world” pragmatic skills, to a new organization that was being pushed by the tensions of accreditation to hire more formally educated persons.

I was concerned as a researcher that the interviewees were appearing “loyal” given the pool I was drawing from, but the Staff Retreat allowed for many casual interactions with employees who were not aware of my research background, and assumed I was an employee of the organization. Although I did not count these interactions in my interviews, this “shadow” status for one day did allow an open access to casual conversations regarding the values and commitments of employees (field notes, Staff Retreat – 6/7).

The interviewees were well equipped to provide stories in the interviews of persons who had helped them as new hires. The impact of these individuals, even years after entering the organization, was still felt, and highlighted by one interviewee: “When I started working here, I was so lost! She really helped me in my hour of need,” (field interview, 3/31). The skill of the “mentor” to show the person how to do routine tasks, and the ability to give the impression that they were not bothered by the ongoing training, resonated with interviewees. New hires tended to seek out stories from persons who they viewed possessed the “big picture” of the organization (field interview, 3/31).

A recent hire stated, “In my job, there are all these forms we have to complete! It takes a special person to explain why they are needed,” (field interview, 3/31). The presence of these persons at critical times helped assure and calm the individual. As she

noted, “When I have what I need to do my job, I feel better. When I know how to get what I need to do my job, I feel great,” (field interview, 3/31). This idea of feeling “great,” when you have the tools or the access to the persons who can help you was repeated numerous times in interviews by line managers and by supervisors. For many of these interviewees, the concept of “feeling great” translated to a competence and confidence in their ability to do their job, or to have the network to know whom to ask about how certain things are done (field notes, 3/17, 4/27). My observation of this desire for access to people and tools showed the organizational value of professionalism embedded into the actions and narratives of the employees when they were doing their jobs (field notes, 3/8, 3/31, 4/27).

One of the interview questions that was more challenging for the interviewees to answer regarded new employees who had been hired in the last couple of years. I was interested in interviewing people who had been brought in right as the organization was transitioning to consolidation. I was looking for people who had a broad sense of the organization, and who had been brought in recently. For the people who had been in the organization more than ten years, it was difficult for them to think of someone “new” (field notes, 2/28, 3/8, 3/17, 4/6). They were quick to provide a name of some of the “old-timers,” but a more recent reference proved to be a stumbling block. I was able to find two people who had been brought in recently. Of course, there were numerous others across the organization, but it was telling that the names of these persons were not at the tip of the tongue for the more seasoned employees. These examples of stories told to me highlighted the ongoing challenge of hiring new people, and the challenge these

new persons have had to work their way up in the organization (field observations, 2/28, 3/17, 3/31, 4/6).

In reflecting on the newly merged organization, as the organization brings new people on board and works to train them on their programs, the existing tension continues with the kinds of skills being brought in by the new hires, and the way these persons are quickly trained. One of the measures identified early in the consolidation was the integration of the human resources and professional development function of the organization (White Paper, 10/05). These were implemented by June, 2005, and the interviews showed that more integration was needed to truly accept this as a milestone (field notes, 2/28, 3/29, 4/11). This professional focus has been the thread in many stories told about the organization because it has not been resolved; it continues to be a source of stress and tension, it is integral in the hiring process, and key to how people navigate the newly merged organization. The vice-presidents and the managers were extremely interested in talking about this “tug-of-war” between experience and education, whereas most of the case managers seemed to believe it wasn’t really a “tug-of-war” but more of a complementary way of viewing people’s skills (field notes, 3/08, 3/17, 3/31, 4/27).

These examples illustrated the conflicting direction of the organization, with the move toward accreditation, and the emphasis on professionalism. The emphasis on accreditation and professionalism meant that people who had spent much of their work time focusing on helping people were now spending much of their work time with paperwork. This individual experience played out on a larger scale in the organization with interviewees seeking to understand their role in the newly consolidated organization.

These examples also served to illustrate how the challenge of bringing in new people took on new meanings, and how people were able to take these new meanings to help them deal with the other challenges.

6.2.3 Collective Meaning Assigned to Bringing Organization Together

By looking at the intersection of narratives and the types of narratives told, I was able to see a retrospective sensemaking taking place. The Staff Retreat in June was the first time people from all four organizations had gathered together under one roof. I was told about the retreat for months before the planned date, and people who referred to it were looking forward to the chance to see colleagues from across the various organizations. Many people had talked about the logistical challenge it would create to provide an event for such a large organization, but the logistical hurdles were overcome, and the event took place as planned (field notes, 3/8, 3/17, 4/6). The Staff Retreat allowed an explicit “traffic circle” to take place, there was physical proximity to each of the stories or “cars,” so that there was an acceleration of sensemaking that took place at this event.

The challenge of bringing the whole organization together at one time was included as one of the three organizational challenges because it was identified in many of the interviews, and it required a dissection of the value to the organization in having the group united as one under one roof. Anyone who has ever had to plan the company holiday party, or put together the office picnic, is aware of the challenges and underlying issues that surface when the group is congregated as one. These types of events tend to carry certain inherent expectations and agendas, and the planners are often only vaguely

aware of the tensions that exist when the planning begins. The tension at SSC was identified in interviews, not only by persons who were responsible for doing the organizing, but also by persons who had expectations for the get-together, and persons who had good experiences in the past with the gatherings. The source documents (yearbooks, Annual Reports) provided photographic evidence of the gatherings, and the interviewees used these documents during the interviews to express their expectations or desires for the get-together (field notes, 3/8, 3/31, 4/27). In fact, at four of the sites that I visited, the yearbooks provided a way for me to open up the conversation more candidly, and, in a sense, the yearbooks were the “avenue” that I gained entry into their more private conversations and stories. For example, one person showed me the photo of the holiday party from eight years ago, and told me that he still kept in contact with all the other six people in the photograph. This photograph then led him to recount how much he appreciated the help he had received from one of the individuals in the photo, and how much he hoped she would stay in the organization.

With the planning almost in place, one interviewee stated, “If we are going to be a united group in more than name, we need to be able to pull this off,” (field interview, 4/6). The collective meaning assigned to the gathering by the interviewees showed the desire to have the get-together, since “that is what an organization that is run professionally does,” (field interview, 3/31), and the visible relief when the event was over (field observations, 6/7). In essence, the Staff Retreat provided a formalized way for people to more explicitly come into the “traffic circle” so that the uncertainties and tensions of the organization could be discussed around good food in a relaxed environment, and then the workshops such as “Laughter the Best Medicine” and

“Storytelling” provided the avenues for getting more stories out into the “public right of way.” The comments from the participants at the Staff Retreat, and from the follow-up interviews, provided stories of the deep desire from employees for empirical evidence that the merger had been a success, and the organization was moving forward in a positive way with the hard-won “economies of efficiency” that had been sought with consolidation. This opportunity for many to meander around the “traffic circle” provided a structured meeting point that had been desired by so many for a couple of years, from the time of the first talk of consolidation.

The large venue, the ready access to food, and the great weather that day provided numerous chances for people to gather in alcoves and benches and “catch up” with each other and talk about their work. Some of the sessions offered that day included, “Laughter, the Best Medicine,” “Storytelling,” and “Go Fish” (a philosophy of creating a culture of trust, accountability, and innovation). Employees were generally enthusiastic in their participation in the sessions. One note of interest came from a participant who said to me, “I didn’t realize we were going to do all this ‘touchy-feely’ stuff,” (Staff Retreat notes, 6/7). He was referring to the “Storytelling” workshop, and had not expected some of the exercises involved in creating our own stories. These workshops were designed by the Planning Group, to help persons get to know others within the organization, and have a chance, as they said, “to recharge our batteries so that we can serve our clients better” (field interview, 4/6). The organizer stated to me, “When employees are energized by their jobs, they do better jobs,” (field interview, 4/6). I interpreted this to mean that the effort and time expended in bringing this group together would pay off, with employees who were more motivated, more capable, and, in essence,

more professional. The tension identified by the organizers showed a desire to bring the group together at one time, but also knowing the tremendous pressure to have the get-together go smoothly (field notes, 4/6, 4/11).

The workshops and their descriptions provided an easy “entry-way” for persons interested in participating in the “traffic circle.” The description (Course Registration, 5/26) of the “Storytelling” workshop said, “Your personal story is stronger and more real than any television reality show. In this participatory workshop, you will learn to take care of yourself, and others, through understanding your personal story and how to change it to support a joyful life.” The “Go Fish” workshop was described in the course request as follows: “FISH is an invitation to reawaken the self-trusting creative spirit within all of us. To develop new attitudes, to have more fun, let’s go fish!” And the “Laughter” workshop was described as the following: “We will nurture the inner child that resides in all of us. Participants will experience a variety of creative activities that promote laughter and fun.” By providing workshops that emphasized a better understanding of oneself, the retreat planners were hoping for successful participation and excitement from the attendees. They also had expressed a desire to have the participants “get away from work for just a day, so they could have fun and see another side of their co-workers,” (field interview, 4/11).

With the Staff Retreat almost over, there was visible relief on the part of the organizers. The day had been well attended, and the sessions were upbeat and positive. Some of the attendees were wishful that more of their staff could have attended. One person noted, “When you run a shelter 24/7, you have to take turns coming to these things” (Staff Retreat notes, 6/7). As the participants talked of the merged organization

in this unified environment, they reflected, with matter-of-fact stories, “this is the way we are now,” though many still felt some remorse over the name loss (Staff Retreat notes, 6/7). The lost name is seen as the “sacrifice” that was needed to make the organization “whole.” One participant was hopeful as she said, “We needed this retreat to show that the changes are mostly over. Now we really are SSC,” (Staff Retreat notes, 6/7).

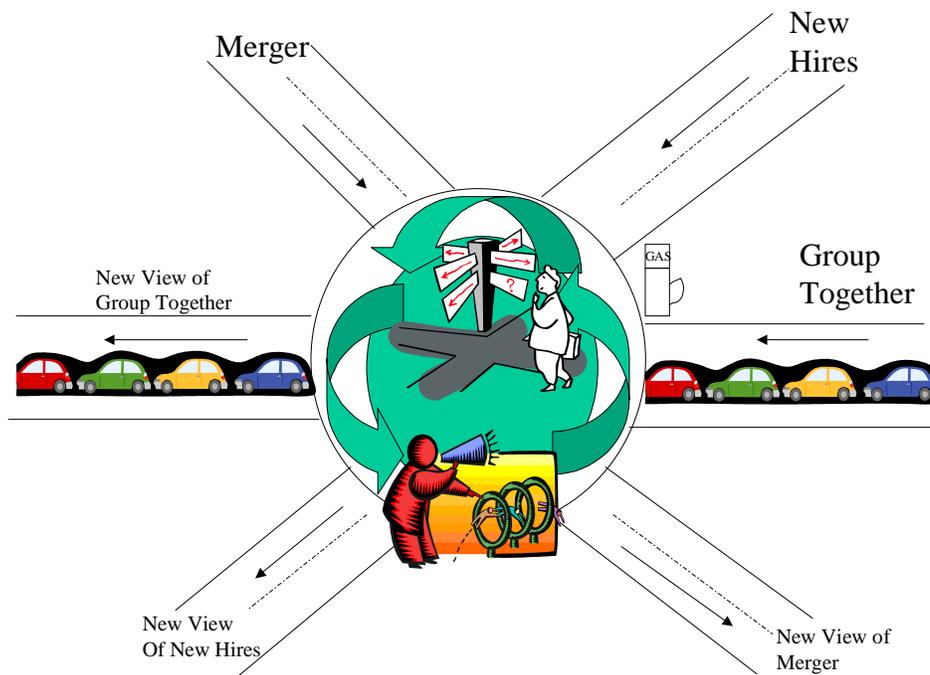
The Staff Retreat, in essence, provided the “traffic circle” that many people had longed for since talk of the merger began in 2003. The Staff Retreat provided the clearest challenge data that showed the chronological issues that arose before, during, and after the event. The stories told during the interviews provided a clear anticipation for the event, I was able to participate in the event, and the follow-up interviews provided excellent opportunities for reflection on the event. It should be noted that there is an implicit “traffic circle” in the organization at all times, but that it is sometimes made more explicit by the challenges. Davenport and Prusak (2000) note that these types of gatherings, or “water cooler” activities, provide an avenue for “serendipity.” They state, “They are opportunities for spontaneous meetings of the mind that have the potential to generate new ideas or solve old ideas in unexpected ways.” (p. 91).

The three organizational challenges presented a collective assignment of meaning that was interwoven and influenced by aspects of each of the challenges. The merger impacted the need for accreditation and created a need to bring the organization together. The hiring of new people was affected by the mobility of the persons within the organization, and these new people were able to see the organization as whole when the Staff Retreat took place. And the Staff Retreat, though a yearly event, was talked about by persons at all levels, and planned for months in advance. These narratives had more

“sophistication” or “maturity” because of their ongoing dimension, and they evolved and developed into key organizational challenges.

6.3 Model and Knowledge Transfer Facilitators

The knowledge transfer model assumes that as narratives are told and retold, they are collectively assigned meaning by the members of the group. My research identified several knowledge transfer facilitators in the organization. These knowledge transfer facilitators, or tools, help the organization to assign a collective meaning to the narratives as they are told and retold. In this organization, the tools used to facilitate the transfer of knowledge were the “superstars,” the indexes, and the knowledge objects. In the “traffic circle” model, the “superstars” are represented by the traffic monitors, because they are responsible for keeping the traffic moving. The “indexes” are represented by the signs and signposts, because they keep people informed. And the knowledge transfer objects are represented by the gas pump, for refueling, so that the cars can keep on going. All of these tools allow the cars to navigate the circle more smoothly and efficiently. The model below shows how the tools provide the mechanisms so that the stories that are being told in an organization can be effectively and collectively assigned meaning:

Figure Three: Tools for Knowledge Transfer

In the “traffic circle” model, the “superstars” are represented by the traffic monitors, because they are responsible for keeping the traffic moving. The “indexes” are represented by the signs and signposts, because they keep people informed. And the knowledge transfer objects are represented by the gas pump, for refueling, so that the cars can keep on going. All of these tools allow the cars to navigate the circle more smoothly and efficiently.

By using this “traffic circle” metaphor, inspired by Gareth Morgan’s *Images of Organization* (1986), I am able to challenge and reshape the way we think about organizations, and to use the metaphor to create assertions implicitly and explicitly about how knowledge is transferred in an organization. A metaphor can be used as a way of seeing a thing as if it were something else (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), and this provides a cognitive bridge between our “everyday” understanding of the world, and our understanding of organizations.

6.3.1 “Superstars”

My research across the organization revealed a “web of knowledge” that was affirmed through many levels. The knowledge agents in the organization were referred to by more familiar terms such as the “superstars” or the “sages” or even the “sacred cows” (field notes, 2/28, 3/15, 3/31). These tended to be people who helped you, who knew the “short cuts.” Part of their approachability was their “open door,” and their deep conviction. One of the individuals even was referred to as the “Rosetta Stone” of the organization (field interview, 3/31). Interestingly enough, even though organized “knowledge models” or “content classification schemes” are not in place in the organization, the “word-of-mouth” network is active, and allows persons with avenues for pursuing the knowledge needs they may have. These people were mentioned, at the “tip of the tongue,” by many employees, because of their “knowledge and professionalism,” (field notes, 3/8, 3/17, 3/31). The sophistication of these avenues appeared to be dependent on the individual’s length of time in the organization, and the personal networks and referencing developed by the individual (field observations. 3/17, 3/31, 4/27).

Additionally, there isn’t a “card catalog” or “Yellow Pages” that allows identification of information within the organization. However, the “web of knowledge” revealed that, in matters related to the work functions of individuals, the supervisors were generally the starting point for seeking information, and the “superstars” were used as backup (field notes, 3/8, 3/17, 4/6). There exists a “social architecture” within the organization, the ties between people, groups, associations, organizations, and institutions. This structure has been referred to as the “web of community” (Lane &

Dorfman, 1997). The structure and process of the organization are, therefore, naturally interrelated as the structure provides “space” for the transfer of knowledge.

When asked why others saw them as the “superstars,” these individuals seemed to believe that it was their longevity with the organization, or that they were in a key position in the organization, or that they were good at brokering resolutions (field notes, 3/17, 3/31, 4/11). It was interesting to note that the “superstars” were found at all levels of the organization, not just at headquarters (field observations, February – May, 2006). They represented a diverse group, representing men and women, different races and age groups. The “superstars” often seemed surprised that they had been named as one of the “knowledge agents.” Their self-deferential style led them to conclude that they had been named because they were good negotiators, or good “distillers” (field notes, 3/17, 3/31, 4/6). These persons have developed what Yanow (2004) refers to as “social expertise,” which is a collective knowing that is developed and learned in action, with very specific historical and social contexts.

Each of “superstars” was quick to be able to identify a good manager: one who is patient, one who shows you how to do things, one who is knowledgeable, so that you *learn it right the first time* (field notes, 2/28, 3/17, 3/31). This desire to “learn it right the first time” was central to understanding the knowledge flows in the organization. In interviewing persons who had been in the organization longer than ten years, their rise into management meant having to “reinvent the wheel” in matters dealing with personnel. They have since identified the need for templates, and several of the managers discussed how helpful it is to have these templates, especially with procedures such as dealing with a problem employee (field notes, 3/31, 4/6).

As the organization demands more reporting time from its managers, these types of templates are helpful because, as one interviewee noted, “I don’t even have time to invent the wheel, much less reinvent it!” (field interview, 3/31). These “superstars” were quick to tell the reasons for the merger, were paired often with new employees, and were very supportive of the organization coming together at once. In essence, the ongoing challenges of the organization were so embedded into their conversations, that they, with their professional access to persons in the organization, were almost the “authors” of these narratives. One of the superstars, who was named by many of the interviewees, was integrally involved with the transition of the organization into one large entity. There was deep admiration and respect for his role and his handling of the merger, and one interviewee commented, “With our staff now near 800 people, he really has a lot on his shoulders,” (field interview, 3/17). This individual was named many times as a “superstar” because of his “ability to overcome hurdles and roadblocks,” (field interview, 3/17).

It wasn’t evident that the organization has adapted to a need for continuous knowledge transfer throughout organizational functions (Coffield, 1998). As mentioned earlier, knowledge transfer in this context is best seen as sensemaking, which is a social and situated process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A continuing challenge for the newly consolidated organization is the development of the central narrative that is told to all new employees as the organization defines itself and its mission. The goal of a truly integrated organization, according to Reissner (2005) is the expression of a narrative that is real for the members of this organization, that is lived in their daily routines, and that

allows members of the organization to reconstruct the past, work in the present, and plan for the future.

The current “standards of accreditation” work of the organization began by looking at the on-going training required by individuals in the organization. This accreditation process, done by the Council on Accreditation (COA), is a huge hurdle for the organization (field notes, 3/8, 4/6). Persons associated with developing the reports for the accreditation expressed mixed feelings, since some of the original four organizations were accredited, but the consolidation now requires a “re-accreditation,” with the stronger “links” bringing up the weaker (field notes, 3/8, 3/31, 5/3). This work to arrive at a uniform accreditation for the merged entity is seen by many as a larger workload, but valuably necessary to the outside community as a hallmark for professionalism.

As an organization that values “para-professionals,” many of the interviewees commented on the ability to rise up through the ranks of the organization, even without a strong formal education background (field notes, 3/8, 3/31, 4/6). Many found strength in the size of the new organization that allows internal transfers to stay revitalized with the job. The ability of these persons to navigate across the organization spoke of the skills and knowledge that were already embedded into the structure of the organization. My observations were that the “generalists” or “jack-of-all trades,” with excellent interpersonal skills, tended to be those who were moved within the organization, and willingly took on the cross-cutting challenges (field observations, 3/8, 3/29, 3/31, 4/27). The benefit to the organization was that these individuals, with their built-in knowledge stores, were able to actively share their knowledge across functional silos.

In using the “traffic circle” metaphor above, the “superstars” are those who help direct traffic and keep the flow of the vehicles moving smoothly in the circle. Additionally, the stories that are told by the “superstars” carried more weight and influence with individuals who were recounting these stories in their interviews. For example, one participant stated that she wasn’t supportive of the merger, and had spoken out against it, but once she heard the reasons for the merger from “James” (not his real name), she saw the merger in a whole new light (field interview, 3/17). One of my earliest interviewees provided several examples of stories of one “superstar” who, “knew the organization inside out – if she says we’ll do it this way, we’ll do it” (field notes, 2/28). What these stories identified was an added emphasis on the stories told by the “superstars.” To use the “traffic circle” metaphor, the vehicles that are entering the circle as stories about events, people, and values recounted by the “superstars” aren’t just cars like the other stories, but are more like “18-wheeler trucks” that take up a lot of space, have a loud horn, and are noticed by everyone in the area. These stories have more status, more “staying power,” more “social capital” within the organization.

6.3.2 Indexes

In listening to the stories that were told during the interviews of how new persons are brought into the organization, the cliché that “Experience is the best teacher” applied to many of these narratives. As Schank (1990, 235) puts it, “We learn from experience, or to put this more strongly, what we learn are experiences. The educational point that follows from this is that we must teach cases, and the adaptation of cases by telling stories, not teach rules and the use of rules.” In my attempt to identify a “knowledge

flow” in the organization, I found that there wasn’t a systematic “flow,” as in water flowing down a river, but more of a “patchwork” of information, that persons had “indexed” into their memory stores.

In order to solve a problem, or when people at work have a “heart-to-heart,” the subjects of their discussion become the topics for the index. This ability to index, or catalog, a story or event, and use it or apply it on recall, is part of the knowledge transfer process. The organizational theory research tends to call this action “lessons learned,” but these indexes, or stored stories, are the knowledge that is used for action by the persons in the organization. This was referred to earlier in Chapter 2 with the literature related to “scripts.” Practices that are embedded and situated allow for ready recall that has a richness, texture, and context for application. When new persons are brought in, there isn’t a systematic method for training them, but the social nature of the organization, and its reliance on persons with strong interpersonal skills, means many of the supervisors were effective and professional at the “indexing” skill (field observations, 3/8, 3/29, 3/31, 5/3).

As a service delivery organization, the ability to maintain and access client files is also a highly developed skill. These files are part of the accreditation process, and are required for billing. One of the interviewees described the painstaking work of his supervisor when he was initially hired to show him exactly the order of the files, the purpose of each line, and where to seek information for the file if it was missing (field notes, 3/29). Given the emphasis on performance, privacy, and program outcomes, all standards of professionalism, these files have become even more important to the organization. In his ten years at the organization, this interviewee had seen a difference

in managers in the importance they gave to the files. However, with the example of his first supervisor, he commits the same time and detail to explaining the files to new employees (field notes, 3/29).

The attention to the files, or “indexing,” shows what Yanow (2004, 10) emphasized, “This knowledge is typically developed within a community of practitioners” that make “local knowledge.” She notes that often this type of knowledge is typically discounted and dismissed, and sometimes even disparaged. This example shows that local knowledge is contextual knowledge, and this person’s attention and description of these files shows how much he felt that the filing was a symbol of professionalism. The files are important not only as a source of information, but as a process that helps people assign meaning to the work of the organization, and is made sense of with the focus on professionalism.

6.3.3 Knowledge Objects

The desire for a strong sense of professionalism was apparent in the importance the interviewees placed on recognition. In many offices I visited, people pulled out old “yearbooks” to show me an award they had received many years past. One of the coveted awards is the yearly award presented to two employees who are nominated and voted on by their peers. In looking through the archival documents, it was interesting to note that many of the persons identified as the “superstars” had been past recipients of this award (SSC yearbooks 1988 – 1994). With the consolidation of the organization, the “yearbooks” have not been published, and the format for recognition now is with the electronic media, and a quarterly newsletter. Although the organization has not identified

the “yearbooks” as a tool for knowledge transfer, based on the interviews with many employees, I saw the yearbook as a “valuable knowledge object” that was used for morale, community building, and knowledge transfer.

Given the value placed by so many of the interviewees on recognition and professionalism, and being able to point to a document to highlighted that recognition, there seems to be some concern that the recognition isn’t as valued as it was in the past (field notes, 3/8, 3/31, 5/10). In one interview, I was shown a clock that was given to the employee by the President for her hard work on a symposium (field notes, 4/7). Another employee showed me his watch that he had been presented for his fifteen years in the organization (field notes, 3/17). Each of these individuals showed me these items with pride, and with an explanation that the organization values hard work and length of service as intrinsic and prerequisite of a professional organization.

The lack of systematic organization of archival documents, and the shift to electronic media, was expressed as a concern by several of the past recipients of recognition awards (field notes, 3/31, 4/6). The narratives that were used to describe recognition followed what Schank (1990, 41) identifies as the “me-goals” of stories: “Tellers can have five intentions with respect to themselves – to get attention, to win approval, to seek advice, to describe themselves, and to achieve catharsis.” Although several intentions can be present at the same time, many of the tellers of their recognition awards, which more deeply express their professionalism and commitment to the organization, were told as a way to describe themselves (field notes, 3/8, 3/31, 4/6).

6.4 Ongoing Challenges as Organizational Narratives

The knowledge transfer model described in this chapter, as well as the “traffic circle” that is used for the collective assignment of meaning, show that the challenges presented by this organization are really ongoing narratives that are told by most organizations. In this case, the narrative string is given shape from the stories, or examples, of each of the issues that are ongoing within the organization. The narrative string that was woven through each of the organizational challenges contained an element of the desire of the organization to value professionalism. The “traffic circle,” where meaning is assigned to the various organizational challenges, allows a way for the organization to develop milestones to self-assess whether this challenge is being addressed in a meaningful way, or whether there needs to be more information, or data, or stories, added to the mix in the circle in order for the organization to make sense of the challenge.

One universal experience involves listening to the stories that are told by persons who have participated in a trip, or event, or meeting, in our absence. As the persons tell the story, they embellish, or emphasize, or leave out details, so that the story that is heard has the meaning that the person was trying to convey. Yet, other participants add their own embellishments, and their own emphasis, and they leave out additional details. As these stories “swirl” around in the “traffic circle,” the meaning that the group subscribes to it develops a “uniform spin” so that this becomes the collaborated story of the trip or event. And the benefit to the teller is that there may have been certain details or pieces that they were not completely aware of, but, as they tell the story, it becomes clearer in their own mind. This process of telling, of hearing, of condensing, and retelling, constitutes the essence of the collective assignment of meaning, and this assignment is

the transfer of knowledge in the organization. The challenges identified in SSC are universal tensions within most organizations, dealing with ambiguities related to transitions, training, and togetherness.

The follow-up interviews were the most revealing in their ability to apply the retrospective sensemaking to the organization. Many of the stories told in these interviews referred to the themes of thinking something related to the merger was a huge burden, but then it worked out well in the end (field notes, 6/15,6/20, 6/22). These interviewees focused on what they perceived to be major milestones for the organization – getting the whole group together, and passing the first budget. The frustrations that were felt when the budget wouldn't "roll up" were minimized with the comment, "Getting passed our first budget was huge – now we have the forecasting ability in the system to make it so much easier next year," (field interview, 6/22). This example of a story that illustrated the merger challenge took on new meaning, and was collectively shaped with the telling and reflecting that occurs in the "traffic circle." The "traffic circle" allows the challenges to be "refracted" so that what comes out of the circle often takes on a positive message, just as light coming out of the prism turns into a rainbow. Although this positive message was observed in this organization, it may not be the case that the "traffic circle" allows the interactions to produce a positive message in other organizations. There are many organizations that may attempt to control the "cars" that enter the "traffic circle" so that only ones with certain messages, either positive or negative, are circulating or being discussed. My observations of this organization showed a lack of awareness of the "traffic circle" or the awareness of the power that the stories carry once they enter the circle.

6.5 Conclusion

A review of the findings presented in this chapter reveals several issues that should be highlighted here. First of all, a tension exists within the organization that uses the three challenges as a launching point for resolution. This tension involves a desire to achieve a certain level of professionalism in the organization, and yet the reality that the organization has not reached that level in many ways. A professional organization would be fully integrated and merged, would bring in new people and train them quickly, and would organize a group gathering for the entire organization and pull it off without a hitch. However, this isn't the reality in any organization. Many organizations strive to reach a certain level of professionalism, and the striving is what brings issues and challenges to the "traffic circle" for discussion. In this chapter, I described the collective assignment of meaning that was given to the three organizational challenges, and I described how certain tools within organizations facilitate the assignment of meaning and the transfer of knowledge.

CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will reiterate the findings in the previous chapter, and then explore their implications. The significance of these findings offers new possibilities for administrators in public and nonprofit organizations to understand the ways in which knowledge can be transferred through the collective assignment of meaning. Additionally, I will discuss the need for further research in the areas of knowledge transfer and narrative inquiry.

7.2 Narratives and Narrative Inquiry Play Role in Findings

The contributions that can be made to the public administration scholarship with the use of narrative inquiry are many and varied. As noted by Ospina and Dodge (2005), narrative inquiry has the potential for strengthening the discourse in public administration research by offering an orientation to inquiry and the methodologies that can be utilized for the kinds of problems and questions in the field which have narrative foundations. White (1999) demonstrated that a narrative theory of knowledge for public administration research can provide a different approach to the qualitative designs such as case studies, participant observation, interviewing, and action research, as opposed to theoretically based research. Another contribution that narrative inquiry makes to the public administration field revolves around illuminating and deepening our understanding of the dimensions of public affairs (Ospina & Dodge, 2005) by integrating rigor into the public administration research, and examining scholars' notions of rigor. According to Ospina

and Dodge, appreciating narrative inquiry's contribution requires a deeper knowledge of the logic of narrative inquiry, an acknowledgement of the diversity of narrative approaches, as well as attention to the implications for judging its quality. Additionally, narratives and narrative inquiry in my research provided a means to collectively assign meaning to the organizational narratives, and group these narratives into the organization's key challenges.

The interest of my research was in the way knowledge is transferred in organizations by focusing on narratives, and my inquiry came from listening to the stories people told about life in the organization and the challenges they were facing. These varied stories focused around events, people and values, some of them repeating or referring to similar events, people, and values. Through an analysis of these earlier stories, three organizational challenges were observed. The initial interviews teased out common themes that were studied further to follow the flow of knowledge within the organization, and to look at the collective interactive nature of that process. There were three challenges that were identified in the organization. The first involved the consolidation of the four separate entities into one large organization. The second challenge was the integration of new personnel into the organization. And the third studied how the newly created larger organization was able to bring together the new entity at one time, for a staff retreat, for the first time, bringing with it the four cultures, and combining it into one group. These challenges identified the embeddedness of knowledge, and the reliance of persons to use their knowledge web to access information and share their experiences.

From the ethnographic standpoint of my research, the use of narrative inquiry allowed me to direct my attention to the narratives of the organization from my initial entry to the organization, and helped me address my broader researcher question of the role that narratives play in addressing organizational challenges. As the interviews and site visits progressed, there were a variety of stories that were told, but the emergence of three distinct challenges, told in the form of narratives, helped define the common narratives that expressed underlying and taken-for-granted assumptions within the organization. My model, which emerged as the months progressed, captures the variety of stories, and some directly or indirectly connected to the broader challenges, but it is the gradual connection to the broader challenges that constitutes the transfer of knowledge.

The broader research question for this study of the role played by narratives in knowledge transfer for addressing organizational challenges was answered by posing and examining two questions. First, can narratives be used as a means to explain knowledge transfer in a social service organization as a collective, interactive process? Second, do narratives create, or contribute to a “knowledge transfer flow” in the organization that can be observed? To answer these questions, it was necessary to note that an interpretivist paradigm was used for this study, which applied a narrative inquiry approach to the organization. By using this approach, I was able to provide a different lens through which organizational challenges were addressed. Experiences are filtered through our existing knowledge and beliefs, and this knowledge and these beliefs constitute how we construct meanings from our experiences. The focus on narratives was an effort to see how participants assigned meaning, or made sense of the three challenges.

It was evident from the narratives used within the organization that a major change, such as a reorganization, lent itself to observability through the narrative interactions. The knowledge agents who are interspersed throughout the organization facilitate the embeddness and situated character of the knowledge transfer. Although a systematic “flow” of knowledge at this organization was not observed, the rapid pace needed to adapt to the restructured organization showed that a collective and interactive process was in place.

The use of narrative inquiry to study the transfer of knowledge in an organization led me to several findings. The first was that knowledge can be transferred through the collective assignment of meaning to ongoing organizational narratives. The second finding came about with the evolution of my model through observation and interviews, which identified a cumulative effect from the organizational narratives, so that as the stories and narratives came together and were told and retold, the challenges took on new meanings, and people were able to take these new meanings to help them deal with the challenges. The third finding identified the nature of the stories and their characteristics, the development of mature narratives as a collective assignment of meaning, and the role of superstars, indexes and objects in the transfer process.

7.2.1 Narratives and Types of Stories Told

The research showed that one method for transferring knowledge in an organization is through the collective assignment of meaning to the ongoing organizational narratives. As Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) showed, narratives are not passive artifacts within organizations, but are active elements in forming and

reforming organizations. They showed that when narratives are captured in particular contexts, as I did with my research, sense was made and the social meanings are constructed (p. 158). The collective assignment of meaning was able to take place because, “Stories told within organizations change with each telling, as plot and character details are deleted or embellished and words and emphasis change. Some old stories are dropped from the repertoire, while new ones are added. Retelling, forgetting, and inventing stories continues to modify the socially constructed world of the storyteller and listener.” (p. 158).

For example, in the organization that I studied, the structural changes that the organization underwent created many levels of uncertainty and confusion. However, as the story of the consolidation was told, the “hindsight” reflection of the interviewees revealed that they hoped the consolidation would provide new opportunities, and they were relieved that many of their fellow employees had benefited from these opportunities. The consolidation was seen by many as a chance and opportunity to grow professionally, and because of this, the consolidation took on new meaning. Where they originally were frustrated with the uncertainties in the organization, the larger organization, with its size for advancement, was now viewed as “a reason to stay.” The sensemaking that occurred regarding the consolidation took place through the telling and retelling of this story, and the challenge was modified by the storyteller and the listener.

7.2.2 Narratives and the “Traffic Circle”

The second finding came about with the evolution of my model of the “traffic circle” through observation and interviews. The “traffic circle” visually showed the

cumulative effect from the organizational narratives, so that as the stories and narratives came together and were told and retold, the challenges took on new meanings, and people were able to take these new meanings to help them deal with the challenges. Beyond the descriptive power of narratives to identify assumptions and beliefs that make up an organization, the cumulative power of these stories offers the potential to strengthen and channel employees concerns into action. The role of the “traffic circle” was to provide a venue for employees to develop and enhance their ability to analyze their own and others’ normative judgments about naturally occurring organization challenges. The “traffic circle” metaphor used in this research serves two purposes. First, it serves as a conceptual tool that has research utility. The metaphor evokes a deeper sense of what is happening in this organization. The model and the metaphor that are used here were helpful for identifying how this particular organization made sense of their ongoing organizational challenges.

This approach could be helpful for another organization to look at how they make sense of their challenges and understand how narratives in the “traffic circle” might facilitate the transfer of collective knowledge. Morgan emphasizes the use of metaphor as a way to learn how we can develop and extend our own ability to understand an organization. By stimulating our way of thinking about an organization and drawing upon something familiar, a “traffic circle,” we can better understand what we do not know, or think we do but have yet to discover in the organization. The “traffic circle” provides the visual collection of narratives in a semi-structured location so that these narratives have the opportunity to be shared and assigned meaning.

The second post-study purpose served by the traffic circle is from an applicable point. This metaphor can be adapted and used by other organizations to develop a similar, gradual, understanding of the knowledge that is traveling, often in roundabout ways, within the organization, and that takes on new meanings as the stories are told and retold regarding the organizations events, people, and values.

7.2.3 Narratives and Tools for Transfer

The third finding identified the nature of the stories and their characteristics, the development of mature narratives as a collective assignment of meaning, and the role of superstars, indexes and objects in the transfer process. In my research, the stories that were told within the organization by persons at all levels involved stories about events, people, and values. Although some stories were specifically told about, say, one event, or one person, the narratives provided a cumulative effect as to start influencing and referencing tangential narratives, and eventually developed into the three organizational challenges. The collective assignment of meaning to these major challenges was aided by the tools used within this organization, the superstars, the indexing, and the knowledge objects. Although this research did not attempt to measure knowledge transfer, these tools were identified in the majority of the interviews as conduits for enhancing the transfer of knowledge.

The use of each of these tools suggests the need for further research into the roles played by each with other organizations. Although many organizations do not use the term “superstars,” but instead may use “technical experts” or “subject matter experts,” these persons, who are skilled at being the ones who help conduct the “flow of traffic” in

the “traffic circle,” bring with them a skill that is hard to quantify and yet invaluable for the transfer of knowledge within the organization. The indexing and the knowledge objects are present in all organizations, but may be valued differently by various levels of the organization. The ability to index, or catalog, a story or event, and use it or apply it on recall, is part of the knowledge transfer process. The “yearbooks” were a tool for knowledge transfer, based on the interviews with many employees, with them being identified as a useful tool that was used for morale, community building, and knowledge transfer. The developing role of the research will be to use these knowledge transfer tools and apply them to the newer thinking on knowledge transfer and narrative inquiry that looks at how informal knowledge “flows” or “spirals” within organizations.

7.3 Lessons for Public Administration

It must be acknowledged that because of the research strategy used for this study, the conclusions that can be drawn, and implications described, are somewhat limited. The purpose of this research, following the approach of Ospina and Dodge (2005), was to identify a specific phenomenon: the use of narratives that gradually assigns meaning to larger challenges that facilitate an organizational effort to address these key challenges. The research used multiple data sources—interviews, participant observation, and documentation, to verify the stories that were told.

My research filled a gap in the public administration research by viewing knowledge transfer as a collective process within an organization, not only meaning passed from one individual to another. Though problems of knowledge transfer can be viewed through various paradigmatic lenses, this dissertation used an interpretivist lens,

rather than the positivist or postmodern techniques, for examining knowledge transfer. White (1999) identified “tremendous gaps in our understanding of the philosophical foundations of research. These gaps impede our ability to develop a systematic body of knowledge about the field and our ability to use that knowledge to improve the functioning of public organizations.” (p. 3). The gap to be filled by my research explores narratives and uses narrative inquiry to determine how knowledge is transferred within an organization.

The research provided many lessons for public administration. For example, it showed that the use of narratives to collectively assign meaning to organizational challenges in the “traffic circle” is one way that knowledge is shared and transferred. It identified the importance of informal knowledge and stories. It showed the difficulties experienced by upper management in trying to assign their own meanings to specific stories in the organization. This is acknowledged as well by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), when they state, “Stories will never conform to management pressures or preferences; imposed stories from hierarchical supervisors will be ignored, just as are top-down rules and other dictates.” (p. 160). My research also showed that certain tools that are in place already in an organization – the superstars, the indexes, and the knowledge objects – can be helpful allies to ensuring knowledge transfer within organizations. Each of these are crucial lessons for management and for the understanding of organizations that are experiencing ongoing change.

Although this case study looked at only one non-profit organization, nevertheless, some limited exploration of implications is possible. For public administration professionals, the findings of this study suggest that a “knowledge transfer flow” can be

found in an organization, but the flow is often more of a “patchwork” flow and not a “smooth” flow. The findings also show that knowledge transfer occurs when narratives in the form of organizational challenges are given meaning collectively by a group through some type of sensemaking activity. In this organization, the sensemaking activity occurs by assigning meaning to the narratives in a “traffic circle,” or gathering of persons in the organization.

Glover (2004) used narrative inquiry to demonstrate its relevance to a grassroots organization. His research demonstrated the explanatory and descriptive approaches that could be done with narrative inquiry. Although he emphasizes the institutional contexts that are forged through the social practice of storytelling, he does not follow the grassroots organizational narratives to determine the embedded nature of the knowledge. Additional research is being done on knowledge transfer as “second-hand experience” (Feldman, 2004). This research looks at extrapolation as an interdependent process of knowledge transfer from the vicarious experiences of others, and then designing practices based on these experiences. A focus of this research looks at “historical episodes,” which concentrate on knowledge transfer from, and about, experiences with practices.

Another lesson for public administration revolves around the notion of how to effectively facilitate knowledge transfer in organizations. Although the research showed the collective assignment of meaning that resulted from the telling and retelling of the narratives, the research did not attempt to measure how effective or quickly this collective assignment of meaning was at readily transferring knowledge within the organization. Nonetheless, Davenport and Prusak (2000) note, “Spontaneous, unstructured knowledge transfer is vital to a firm’s success. Although the term

‘knowledge management’ implies formalized knowledge transfer, one of the essential elements is developing specific strategies to encourage such spontaneous exchanges.” This was the value and the benefit of the Staff Retreat, and the lesson for public administration. The “traffic circle” creates an environment for spontaneous exchanges of cumulative narratives, and the informal knowledge can be more readily passed from one person to another.

It is helpful, as well, for public administrators to be aware of the “frictions” (Davenport & Prusak, 2000) that can impede knowledge transfer. Using the “traffic circle” metaphor, these frictions could be seen as the “roadblocks” or the “crashes” that occur when narratives aren’t shared or aren’t brought to a more open discussion forum. These “frictions” can include lack of trust, lack of time and meeting places, lack of absorptive capacity, and different cultures and vocabularies (Davenport & Prusak, 2000; O’Dell, 1998). However, public administrators who are aware of these barriers can work within their organizations to create and promote opportunities for narrative sharing.

Richard Rorty (1996) argues that all knowledge that we have about public administration is constructed through conversations, both historically and culturally, and in these conversations, we tell one another stories that help persuade one another to adopt our views. This ability to persuade, and the “traffic circle” which allows the environment to persuade, is the crux of the argument that knowledge is conversation, and narrative inquiry is the tool for assessing the transfer of that knowledge. In the next section, I will focus on the lessons for narrative inquiry literatures.

7.4 Lessons for Narrative Inquiry Literatures

Literature on narrative inquiry has been incorporated into the disciplines of sociology, communication, management, and anthropology. This study was viewed through the lens of public administration. The field of public administration has, and uses, what could be termed parables, which are actually case studies. Harold Stein (1952, xxvii) of the Inter-University Case Program, defines a public administration case as “a narrative of the events that constitute or lead to a decision or group of decisions by a public administrator or group of public administrators...The studies contain much detail and an effort is made in the composition, by a variety of rhetorical devices, to give the reader a feeling of actual participation in the action...Emphasis throughout is on decision, whether as an act or process...” While the cases do not attempt to impart “absolute” truth, they do supply the kind of historical material, and the details of the case are examples of informal knowledge, that can be used to represent a sufficiently practical recreation of reality. From this representation, or situated experience, the reader can make an analysis, and the discussion is useful and meaningful to practitioners as well as to the students.

As mentioned earlier in the literature review, in order to understand how knowledge is transferred, the knowledge literature carefully distinguishes between data, information, and knowledge. For purposes of the narrative inquiry literature, the model of the “traffic circle” shows stories that are told about events, people or values as the “cars” that are entering the “traffic circle” and are representative of the data. They are self-contained, and in isolation, have no meaning. Information, then, comes from the data that is collected. In the model of the “traffic circle” the information is represented by the

various challenges in the organization. The information needs context. This context, which is the collective assignment of meaning, is combined with information to create the capacity to act, and is known as “knowledge transfer.” The retrospective function that the “traffic circle” serves adds another layer of professionalism to an organization that is struggling to deal with its varied and diverse challenges. The “traffic circle” allows us to know the world, not just by objectively observing our external reality, but also by constructing how we understand it with others (Berger & Luckman, 1966). The narrative inquiry literature can build on this model and test it in other organizations.

The interpretivist study that I conducted indicates the need for purposeful, assignment of meaning to address real, ongoing organizational problems. The Garbage Can model (Cohen, et. al., 1972) of the world, in contrast, suggests choice opportunities, resources, decision makers, coming together in random ways, not necessarily in an organizationally purposeful way. This is an important finding in the context of other ways to visualize knowledge transfer and decision making. As narratives mature, they take on organizational gravity with purpose, and a focus evolves, rather than a random assignment of resources and decisions.

The present research contributes to the narrative inquiry literature by moving beyond descriptive studies to focus on the informal nature of the knowledge. Although past research has emphasized the significance of understanding the knowledge transfer process, little empirical research exists as to the nature of the transfer, and the embedded and situated access to that knowledge. It was evident from the narratives used within the organization that a major change, such as a reorganization, lent itself to observability through the narrative interactions. The knowledge agents who are interspersed

throughout the organization facilitated the embeddedness and situated character of the knowledge transfer. Although a “flow” of knowledge at this organization was not observed, the rapid pace needed to adapt to the restructured organization showed that a collective and interactive process was in place.

The scope of the current research project was to study one organization in-depth. The interest of the researcher was in how one particular nonprofit organization transfers knowledge. However, the interest of the researcher was not in how various other organizations conduct knowledge transfer, or how their knowledge transfer techniques compare and contrast. This research presents an in-depth analysis of how one organization assigns collective meaning to challenges, and therefore transfers knowledge. It is one form of knowledge transfer that can be used to explore the knowledge transfer practices of other organizations. Narrative inquiry, by its very nature, often suggests more questions than it answers.

Although the research project uncovered ways in which this organization is unique, it provided more data on the ways in which its knowledge transfer approaches were general, and the intent of the research was not to explain all organizational knowledge transfer. This is helpful for the narrative inquiry literature because the question of whether the experiences of embedding knowledge and sharing it across the organization through narratives cannot be answered definitely from the current research, and suggest one area of future research. The lesson for narrative inquiry research follows the approach used by Yanow (2000) describing her interpretive research methods. She states, “I am attempting to recapture in writing, to the extent possible, the layered circularity of sensemaking that characterizes interpretive research methods. Such

research rarely begins with a clearly formulated hypothesis taken to a field site for testing. Instead, it more commonly leads from insight into an experience and moves forward from there in a recursive, seemingly circular fashion. . .” (p. S11). This circular path, so aptly reflected in the “traffic circle,” shows the narrative inquiry research approach that can be used for other organizations as they work to collectively assign meaning to their key organizational challenges.

7.5 Summary

The purpose of this research was to examine how narratives were used to informal transfer knowledge across the organization. This research also aims to enrich the public administration and nonprofit literatures by utilizing narrative inquiry to examine the transfer of knowledge in a nonprofit social service organization that serves a vital public purpose under contracts with the government. The case study incorporated an ethnographic approach that embraced a new notion of “knowledge” as situated and embedded. This dissertation established a link to the organizational knowledge transfer literature by looking at the way researchers conceptualize knowledge, and knowledge transfer, how researchers discuss the overlap between learning and transfer, and how narratives can be used as the unit of analysis for exploring knowledge transfer.

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