Counter-narratives and counter-stories

The dynamics of dialectical dialogical storytelling

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Introduction

The focus of this chapter is to contribute to the conceptualization of the dynamical forces involved in constitutive and performative organizational storytelling. For decades, storytelling has been acknowledged as both constitutive and performative in bringing forth worlds and realities. The chapter departs from Boje’s triad storytelling framework as it distinguishes between narratives and living stories. Furthermore, antenarratives contribute to the conceptual understanding of the dynamic interplay between narratives and living stories in space and time (see Figure 3.1).

The conceptual work of this chapter is rooted in addressing the distinction between the narrative – counter narrative middle and the middle involved in the encounter between living stories and counter-stories. Furthermore, the chapter contributes by enlightening the antenarrative as a third middle that connects the dynamics of the other two middles in space and time. What is the nature of these three middles? How do they differ from each other with regard to the nature of their dynamical forces? The relevancy of these questions is accentuated by the growing academic interest in counter-narratives. Dealing with these questions from a dialectical dialogical perspective, the chapter suggests distinguishing between counter-narratives and counter-stories in order to enrich our understanding of the complexity of storytelling dynamics in organizations.

Boje (2014, p. 67) has, among others, been inspired by Bakhtin’s dialogical philosophy. This chapter therefore views the storytelling framework through Bakhtin’s perspective. Bakhtin’s distinction between dialogue and monologue supports the need to distinguish between narratives and living stories. While some storytelling researchers use narratives and stories interchangeably, Boje argues for their distinction.

Narratives are associated with the single-voiced monologue: “the narrative forms are always encased in a firm and stable monologic framework” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 17). They tend to be formed through a linear BME structure encompassing a fixed Beginning, fixed Middle, and fixed Ending, each consisting of a pre-structured series of events (Boje, 2014, p. xx). Hence, narratives are constitutive of a ready-made settled world.
In contrast, living stories are associated with Bakhtin’s multi-voiced dialogue and its openness towards diversity, heterogeneity, and alterations. They constitute what Bamberg also refers to as small stories that are told in passing, being unfinalized, fluent, contextual, and situational, as well as embedded in the social realm of interaction. They constitute the real stories of our lived lives (Bamberg, 2004, p. 356); stories that are shared through the living story web of story-tellers and story-listeners (Boje, 2014). Opposing the narrative ready-made world, the dialogical conception implies a world living in dissensus; an incomplete and unfinalized wholeness, albeit still alive and under construction. Living stories are thus the real-life stories of the world of life (Bakhtin, 1999).

Antenarratives work in the tensed middle between narratives and living stories. They are defined as “fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and improper storytelling” (Boje, 2001, p. 1). Boje (2014; 2001, 2008, 2011, 2012) has defined antenarratives in terms of five dimensions: bet, before, beneath, between, and becoming. A sixth dimension (beyond) was added by Svane (2019a). The six dimensions (see Figure 3.1) illuminate how antenarratives operate in the middle between narratives and living stories. Going beyond the petrified taken-for-grantedness of narratives-counter-narratives, antenarratives grasp, feel, and intuit the future in advance of its arrival. Differing from the retrospective past-oriented temporality of narratives and the now-ness of living stories, antenarratives bet on the future through prospective (futuring) sensemaking of what is grasped. By weaving and piecing fragments of the living stories together and repackaging narratives before narrative cohesion, antenarratives are performative in resolving the petrified gap between narratives-counter-narratives. By being responsive and answerable to the living stories grounded in the real world beneath the narrative abstraction, antenarratives care about the well-being of the world of life in its ongoing process of becoming.

Figure 3.1 The dynamics of storytelling. Developed by David Boje and Marita Svane.
The conceptual complexity of the storytelling framework increases with the intersection of counter-narratives; a concept that has gained an increasingly firm foothold within the storytelling field (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Frandsen, Kuhn, & Lundholt, 2016). According to Andrews and Bamberg (2004), counter-narratives can be identified as positional categories in tension with other categories playing out at multiple layers of positioning. Counter-narratives are thus defined as relational categories that only make sense in relation to that which they are countering.

The intersection of the prefix ‘counter’ gives rise to new questions such as: What is meant by ‘counter’? What is the nature of a counter position? Does the meaning of ‘counter’ change when the prefix is related to narratives, to living stories, or to antenarratives? Furthermore, the prefix ‘counter’ is unavoidably associated with the idea of tensions and contradictions appearing in the middle between something. Hence, the prefix seems to foster a natural call for dialectics as a relevant perspective that, in addition to Bakhtin’s dialogue, may contribute to shedding more light on the dynamical forces involved in the three middles of the storytelling framework. The use of the prefix ‘counter’ and its associated middle thus need further scholarly attention.

The chapter will draw on Hegel and Bakhtin as they represent two approaches to the ‘middle’ that fundamentally differ from each other. Hegel’s work on dialectics is chosen as it can be argued that Bamberg’s definition of counter-narratives reflects a dialectical relation. Moreover, Hegel’s dialectics is already used by Boje to further enlighten storytelling (Boje 2016a, 2016b).

Figure 3.1 illustrates that D1 is related to the dialectical middle between narratives – counter-narratives, whereas D2 is related to the dialogical middle between exchanged living stories. The dynamics of the dialectical and dialogical middles differ fundamentally from each other as they work with time and space in different ways. As such, they contribute to clarifying the dynamics of storytelling.

By connecting the two middles with each other, the six antenarrative dimensions aim to work with the spatializing (e.g. create, open, polarize, close spaces) and temporalizing (futuring many possible futures and rehistorizing the many forgotten or neglected pasts) processes of storytelling.

The conceptual framework of dialectical dialogical storytelling thus contributes by identifying three types of middles as relevant to the dynamics of storytelling. A fourth one, the excluded middle, can be added in order to address what happens if the dialectics and dialogues cease to work.

The middles of storytelling
1. The dialectical middle of N-CN (narratives – counter-narratives)
2. The dialogical middle of LS-CS (living stories – counter-stories)
3. The antenarrative middle between N-CN and LS-CS
4. The excluded middle

The chapter is structured in three sections. The first section accounts for a dialectical perspective on narratives and counter-narratives. The second section examines a dialogical perspective on living stories and counter-stories. The third discusses the role of antenarratives in connecting narrative – counter-narratives with living stories – counter-stories. At the end of the chapter, the contributions to the academic field, as well as the practical implications to management, are summarized and further research is suggested.
A dialectical perspective on narratives and counter-narratives

Similar to storytelling, dialectics is acknowledged as a constitutive and performative metatheoretical perspective apt for analyzing the dynamics of contradictions, tensions, paradoxes, and oppositional forces inherent in social and organizational life (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Putnam, Fairhurst, & Banghart, 2016).

Dialectic is a method of discussion dating back to ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato. Throughout its long history, many variations of dialectics have emerged, including that of Hegel. Despite their differences, their basic worldviews share some family resemblance as they all deal with contradiction, change, praxis, and totality (unity) (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, pp. 3–4, 6).

Based on the work of Hegel (1977, 2010) and the literature reviews conducted by Putnam et al. (2016), and Baxter and Montgomery (1996), the main ontological assumptions underlying a dialectical perspective are summarized in Figure 3.2. At the heart of dialectics, we thus find the dynamical interplay between mutually defining contradictory poles, which negate and exclude each other whilst simultaneously being related; each possessing what the other is missing. In Figure 3.1, dialectics is associated with the encounter between narratives and counter-narratives for two reasons. First, narratives and hence also counter-narratives are defined as monological by Bakhtin. Both narratives and counter-narratives centripetally orbit around their own center, with clear boundaries between them. Second, narratives and counter-narratives are defined by Andrews and Bamberg (2004) as relational interdependent categories that only make sense in relation to one another. This definition thus assumes a tensed unity of opposing relational entities. Together, the two arguments support the relevancy of applying a dialectical perspective when conceptualizing the dynamical forces of encounters between narratives and counter-narratives. The dynamics of the dialectical middle between narratives – counter-narratives are elaborated on in the following section.

1) **Contradictory oppositions:**
   Mutually negating and excluding each other.

2) **Unity of oppositions:**
   One presupposes the other in its very meaning and existence.
   Defining and sensemaking each other in terms of:
   - Differences
   - Sameness

3) **The dynamic tensed interplay of oppositions:**
   The ongoing dynamic interaction occurring between unified oppositions due to their dialectical tensions.
   Dialectics deal with the tensions inherent in relating.

4) **The ‘both/and’ quality of the oppositions:**
   Truth immanent in both of them.

5) **The constitutive ‘middle’ mediating between oppositions:**
   The middle transforms the contradictory oppositions, as well as their unity, thereby driving organizational and social change.

6) **The dialectical forces and processes of relating oppositions:**
   Defining, excluding and unifying, and negating and mediating.

Figure 3.2 Ontological assumptions of dialectics.
The dialectical middle and its polarized space

Hegel's philosophy is based on the ontological assumption that the aliveness of the world and its movement and actualization is due to the work of dialectics (Hegel, 2010, § 81). Contradiction is the fundamental moving principle of the aliveness of the world and its inhabitants (Hegel, 2010, § 119). In order to understand, intervene, and carry things into effect, we need to become conscious of the ontological contradictions inherent in the world and of the dialectical struggles through which they transform and further develop the world and its inhabitants in their ongoing movement.

In Hegel's account of dialectics, the concepts of unity, diversity, difference, and contradictions play a key role. Using the notion of the world assumes a unity. However, “the unity has to be conceived in the diversity” (Hegel, 2010, § 88). The unity is not fixed and settled but instead always in the process of becoming, unresting, and moving because of its inherent contradictions and struggles (Hegel, 2010, § 88). To understand what dialectic is and how it moves, we need to distinguish between diversity, difference, and contradiction.

Initially, Hegel makes a distinction between diversity and difference. Diversity refers to the fragments of the unity that fall indifferently apart (Hegel, 2001, § 931), whereas difference presupposes a relation between being and its otherness. Difference thus indicates a specific relation where one and the other are mutually defined and determined with regard to their relational differences and similarities. Subsequently, their similarities and differences demarcate their individual uniqueness, as well as their unifying sameness. One is what the other is not. The Hegelian dialectical betweenness is thus composed by two counter centers: the self-center and the other-center (Gurevitch, 2001).

Meaning nothing exists without the other, they presuppose each other in their mutual constitutive process of becoming. Because of their co-constitutive relation, they carry within themselves the immanent potentiality of becoming something else mediated by their relational otherness (Hegel, 2001, § 932). Hence, they are co-emerging and co-developing.

Distinguishing between diversity and difference in this manner, Hegel continues by relating difference to oppositions and contradictions (Hegel, 2001, § 934–935); being different is not enough to form a dialectical relation. The difference needs to form an oppositional contradiction, meaning that one is excluding the other, one being positive and the other negative. Hence, we arrive at the well-known ‘thesis’ and ‘antithesis’ proposition of dialectics. Negating the thesis, the antithesis determines what the thesis lacks or has not yet become but potentially could do by merging with the anti-thesis.

The epistemological movement from grasping differences in general to understanding differences as contradictions requires what Hegel calls intelligent reflection and thinking, as opposed to superficial and ordinary thinking remaining indifferent by forgetting about the process of negation and only remembering differences in general (Hegel, 2001, § 961, § 962). Hence, we need to sharpen our critical and reflexive understanding of what is essentially different about the difference. This is a process of determining and separating the oppositional poles inherent in the contradiction.

The important point of Hegel's dialectics is this polarizing process of moving from diversity to difference to contradictions, defined as the mutual excluding and opposing poles which still constitute a unity, however unresting, as they only make sense in relation to each other. The diversity of a fragmented world is thus structured and organized in dialectical relations of polarized contradictions.

Having identified and qualified the opposing poles as the thesis and anti-thesis, the dialectical dynamics continue to work across the middle between the two poles. The dialectical dynamics are related to what Hegel refers to as the law of identity-in-difference (Hegel, 2001, § 954) implying three essential features.
First, the acknowledgment that both sides of the contradiction are equally right and equally wrong. Dialectic thus rejects reasonings for true versus false, for the either/or position. Instead, dialectic allows both sides of the contradiction to take part in the self-moving truth (Hegel, 1977, § 780, § 58) and transformation.

Second, the law of identity-in-difference implies that the transformation moves toward a third moment, called synthesis by some, albeit not by Hegel (Pinkard 2011, 6, Hegel 1977: § 65). In the third moment, the identity of the unity is transformed as it now encompasses both the thesis and the anti-thesis. Having resolved the previous contradiction, a new thesis emerges at a higher level only to be contradicted with multiple new anti-theses arising and co-emerging due to the aliveness of the world. Dialectics is thus an ongoing process until no further contradictions appear.

Third, the law of identity-in-difference implies that the dialectical transformation occurs as a merger between thesis and anti-thesis. The dialectical transformation of the thesis encompasses two movements: 1) the preserving and conserving and 2) the vanishing and canceling. Challenged by its anti-thesis, the thesis absorbs from the anti-thesis what it is missing, while at the same time maintaining and preserving its useful parts. Thesis and anti-thesis merge through these two movements.

The excluded middle and its closed space
As long as the encounter is based upon the both-and principle and as long as new contradictory and negating anti-theses emerge, dialectics continue to work in the dynamical middle between the two poles. Without these two dialectical principles, movement ceases to occur and the world turns into a closed, fixed, and mechanical system of relations. Mechanical comparison, contrast, and denial imply the exclusion of dialectics and is referred to as the law of the excluded middle (Hegel, 2001, § 952). The excluded middle is governed by the either/or principle allowing for only one truth. One is right, the other wrong (Hegel, 2010, § 119).

In the excluded middle, the negating and mediating force of the anti-thesis is rejected. Consequently, dialectics cease to work and is replaced by the dualistic positions of opposite poles with clear-cut boundaries, no overlap, and no middle. The middle thus turns into a closed, fixed space where each of the opposite poles arrive at their respective dead-ends. The most essential difference between the dialectical and excluded middle is thus about whether or not otherness is acknowledged.

The dialectical middle between narratives – counter-narratives
The following case study illustrates the dialectical struggle between narratives and counter-narratives. It also reveals the devastating process of moving from the dialectical middle to the excluded middle deadening the in-between dynamics by suppressing otherness.

Case study of D1
This case study is about a fragmented consultancy organization that had passed through a number of horizontal mergers, giving rise to us-them categorizations. “It was like marrying your worst enemy”, as stated by one of the organizational members. A new CEO initiated a multi-voiced strategizing process involving the whole of the organization at all levels as an attempt to break down these counter-positions.

At the end of the process, some changes did occur. For instance, several members began to refer to ‘we’, particularly when speaking about the future of the company. However, all did not move along in this direction. A picture drawn by some members of the company identified the
emergence of a new counter position. The picture uncovered the contradiction between the
change ready team: those organizational members who were opposed to some of the issues
apparent in the new direction. Unflatteringly, they were drawn as dead dinosaurs. The dead
dinosaurs referred, among others, to the 30 members of the economic department

After tense discussions and conflicts, the CEO and other organizational members stopped
listening to their arguments. Gradually, the voices silenced. The door to the economic department
began to stay closed on an everyday basis. Suddenly, on one particular day, all 30 members of the
department emailed their resignations to the CEO. Through an organized process, they were hired
by a competitor and resigned on the very same day.

The event gave rise to many self-critical reflections such as: Why did we not see it coming?
What signals did we overlook? In particular, one interesting reflection came up: Did they do it
because they were afraid of losing their job because of their resistance?

The story exemplifies how the dialectic middle, as well as the excluded middle, works in social
interactions.

The categorization between us and them as the worst enemy, as well as the contradiction
between the change ready team and the dead dinosaurs, exemplifies how narrative and counter-
narrative have been co-constructed as oppositional contradicting poles in and through social
interactions. The story illuminates how the narrative language is used to label, stereotype, and
categorize the many voices of the organization, thereby creating polarized positions. Narratives
can therefore be viewed as a constructive mean for “the creation of characters in space and time,
which in turn are instrumental for the creation of positions …”, as well being “… aspects of
situated language use, employed by speakers/narrators to position a display of contextualized
identities” (Bamberg, Georgakopoulou, 2008, p. 379). The language used in the story displays
the construction of heroes and villains, enemies and friends, as well as the emerging resistance,
which – to begin with – is loudly displayed.

Narratives and counter-narratives are thus co-produced in and through the discursive inter-
action, as well as forming the context and basis for the ongoing discourse. Because narrative and
counter-narrative are discursively rooted in interactions, their relational categories should not be
conceived of as static. On the contrary, their dialectical interplay is fluid and ever-changing, thereby
potentially transforming the N-CN constructions. Emerging in the presence of each other and
through a discursive process, the interactive realm of everyday interactions thus constitutes the

The story illuminates the dialectical dynamics in the sense that the contradiction between us
and them is resolved through their merger, developing a sense of ‘we’. Moreover, the positional
and labelling categories of the change ready team versus the dead dinosaurs illuminate how new
oppositional poles emerge through everyday interaction. The resistance of the group of people
identifies how resistance against narrative singularity, coherency, and dominance may develop
and take the shape of a counter-narrative defined as being in opposition to the grand (master)
narrative (Bamberg, 2004; Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Frandsen et al., 2016).

The dialectical dynamics of N-CN thus seem to be at work at the beginning of the storyline.
Its premises, however, seem to change at the end. The silence and the closed door indicate the
closing down of the space for speech and action and hence a turn towards the excluded middle
where the either/or principle rules. The two groups seem to be orbiting around their own
center, getting more and more stuck and cemented in their pre-defined structures and relations.
Hence, the resisting group finally exits.

Even though the excluded middle may have been in play, ceasing the dialectical movement in
this particular space time frame, this does not imply that dialectics is not at work in other space
time frames of the organization. In fact, the exit can be interpreted as the outcome of a dialectical discourse that has moved into the shadows, excluding the rest of the organization from participation, yet includes the competitor, looking for alternative solutions. The exit phenomenon is what Deleuze refers to as lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Hegel's polarizing dialectic has been criticized by Deleuze, among others (Henriksen, 2017). By sharpening differences through sensemaking and reflection to such an extent that contradictory poles emerge, numerous small nuances, variations, and alterations may be lost as they are submerged into the antithetic formation of the privileged contradiction. In the ongoing process of transformation, they are overlooked and ignored by the accentuated contradiction. In that sense, the polarized contradiction is constructed as an abstraction of concrete real life without noticing the real emerging differences. In fact, Deleuze's criticism addressing the lost sight of multiplicity resembles Bakhtin's critique against dialectical betweenness (unfolded later in the chapter).

In fact, this criticism constitutes Hegel's contribution as he acknowledges that we tend to comprehend differences and individuality through processes of abstraction, reflection, and sensemaking (Hegel, 1977, § 235, § 305). Hegel conceptualizes the dualist tendency underpinning much of Western thinking producing abstract binary logical relations. The split between us and them, as well as between the change ready team versus the dead dinosaurs, thus decodes a sensemaking process that leads to generalized and stereotyped abstractions reducing the diversity of the organizational life. The apparent consensus among the 30 employees indicates a counter-narrative discursive power guiding and controlling sensemaking whilst demanding allegiance. Subsequently, both narratives and counter-narratives may regress into simplifying abstractions as the straightforward contradictory implies a reduction of the dialectical manifold into the dialectical opposition between counter-positions (Gurevitch, 2001).

The contribution of a dialectical perspective to the triad storytelling framework is summarized in Figure 3.3.

The dialogical middle and its open space

Bakhtin's approach to the middle differs from Hegel's dialectical betweenness. Whilst Hegel's dialectics work across the middle between the two centers, Bakhtin's dialogue works in the middle, on the boundary of the two centers. Being off-centered, Bakhtin aims to engage a multiplicity of subjects, topics, and voices in order to expand multiplicity and polyphony (Gurevitch, 2001). Bakhtin thus rejects the dialectical betweenness for a number of reasons.

In Bakhtin's view, existence and life cannot be separated from dialogue: “To be is to communicate” (Bakhtin, 1984) or from the act: “to be in life, to be actually, is to act, is to be unindifferent toward the one-occurrent whole” (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 42). Dialogue is thus a live process of being responsive to events with our lives through action and speech (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 2). We are always already in dialogue, there is no entering into dialogue as if there existed other ways of living (Morson & Emerson, 1990). In Bakhtin's understanding, dialogue, not dialectics, constitutes the ontological foundation of life. The opposing contradiction can only work as an abstraction pigeonholing individuals or social entities. In this sense, detaching people from the real world of life, the intimate relation between the person and his or her act, is lost.

Bakhtin therefore conceives of dialogue and dialectic as two different models through which to understand social life. Even though “dialectics was born of dialogue so as to return again to dialogue on a higher level” (Bakhtin, 1987c, p. 162), dialectics fails to comprehensively grasp the infinite contextual meaning or the contact between diverse voices and speaking subjects. By finalizing and systematizing dialogue, dialectic instead leads to a reification of the living dialogue:
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Dialogue and dialectics. Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness – and that’s how you get dialectics.

(Bakhtin, 1987a, p. 147)

In Bakhtin’s view, dialectical betweenness thus represents a monological perspective on communication, reducing people to counters by treating individuals or social entities as monads with clear boundaries. In objection, Bakhtin (1984) states that we are always wholly on the boundary, on the threshold between one’s own and someone else’s consciousness.

An essential difference between dialogue and dialectic is about the process of merging. Dialectics aims to merge through synthesis, whereas dialogue remains open-ended and unmerging. Bakhtin thus stresses the importance of staying on the boundary of unmerged horizons. Although the goal of the synthesizing process is to achieve coherency between merged voices, the dialogical encounter continues to remain open for a plurality of unmerged voices. In dialogue, voices are not to be contained within a single consciousness, as in monologism, or to be reduced to a counter or monad as they are much looser, messier, and more open (Morson & Emerson, 1990). Dialogical understanding is active and continuously creative (Bakhtin, 1987a, p. 142).

Figure 3.3 The dialectical betweenness of narratives – counter-narratives.
The unmerging, infinite, and unfinalized dialogue is thus full of tension, giving rise to the emergence of something new. This shines through in what Bakhtin defines as the great dialogue: “a dialogue where all voices participate with equal rights for which reason the dialogue becomes rich in reference to other voices and their discourses, alternative worldviews, questions, doubts, criticism, counter-arguments, and different interpretations” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 71).

What, then, are the dynamical forces of the dialogical middle, as opposed to the synthesizing forces of dialectics? Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia and its inherent centripetal and centrifugal forces offer a relevant answer to this question. Heteroglossia refers to the different-speech-ness (Roberts, 2003) of the polyphonic dialogue and embraces different voices of the past, the present, and the future. Moreover, heteroglossia emerges as an outcome from the clashes between the centrifugal forces of decentralization and disunification and the centripetal forces that serve to unify and centralize. If separated from the centrifugal forces, the centripetal forces may result in a closed-structured and schematized space (Svane, 2019b). The ongoing battle between the forces, however, ensures the potential openness of the space. The heteroglossic unfinalized outcome thus differs from the process of merging across the boundary, of producing sameness and eliminating contradictions. Even if agreement occurs among the plurality of voices, Bakhtin warns us not to conceive of the agreement as sameness, but to understand agreement in dissensus as the voices may agree but for different reasons: “…agreement retains its dialogic character, that is, it never leads to a merging of voices and truths in a single impersonal truth, as occurs in the monologic world” (Bakhtin, 1984). On the contrary, “Each retains its own unity and open totality, but they are mutually enriched” (Bakhtin, 1987b, p. 7). The dialogical process therefore educates each side about itself and the other: “I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (mutual reflection and mutual acceptance)” (Bakhtin, 1984). Relational selves are thus co-constituted not across boundaries but on the boundary itself (Gurevitch, 2001).

Thanks to heteroglossia and its immanent forces, the dialogical encounter is kept open for the countless varieties, alterations, shadings, and gradations of the world of life. To the extent it makes sense to speak of a contradiction, Bakhtin states that these contradictions are not dialectical but spread out, standing alongside or opposite one another but not merging (Bakhtin, 1984).

The following case study illuminates how to work in the middle and off-center from a dialogical perspective.

**Case Study of D2**

Sarah works as a middle manager at a hospital. In her section, all managers join a leadership group coordinating actions and decision making. About a year ago, a new manager, Peter, entered the group. Very shortly after his entrance as a group member, Sarah experienced conflicts and collaborative problems in their relationship with a devastating effect on not only her leadership performance but also on her personal well-being. She experienced how his decision making, actions, and ways of communication intervened into her areas of responsibility without any pre-given information or warning. Moreover, his dominating behavior violated the norms and conventions of the group, which was used to much more open and democratic leadership practices. She felt that her personal values and leadership integrity was violated by his interference and furthermore that his way of acting was disrespectful towards her position as an equal collegial leader, as well as towards the rest of the group.

Whenever she responded with disagreement or counter-arguments, she ended up in new conflicts, which became more and more severe until the point where she realized that the conflicts had to do with their interpersonal relationship and could not be ascribed to him alone. From then
on, she started to reflexively experiment with her own way of speaking and acting in relation to him. Gradually, she got to understand that in the beginning of their relationship, she perhaps communicated in an aggressive and direct way. Direct confrontations, her embodied moods, tone of voice, and use of language revealed her feelings of irritation and anger.

During the next 8 months, she consciously tried to change her own communicative practices. She became aware of controlling her own immediate emotional response. Instead of being the first voice to speak or respond to Peter’s ideas, she started to withhold her own viewpoints and asked the other members of the team to share their perspectives and co-inquire into ideas or thoughts raised at the meetings. When developing the agenda for each meeting, she made sure to have each team member be responsible for a topic to be discussed at the meetings. Gradually over the months, it seemed as if the dialogical space was restored. Over time, it also seemed as if Peter began to relax more, listen more, and speak less. The other members gradually shifted from being silent and passive to taking an active part in the discussions. Sometimes, new creative solutions to problems emerged during these discussions which neither Peter nor Sarah had thought of. It was not the case that new incidents of tensed situations between Peter and Sarah did not occur. But according to Sarah’s story, it seemed as if she and the leadership group had learned how to handle such incidents in their communicative practices.

Sarah’s story discloses how she tries to move herself and Peter away from the self- and other-centered poles towards the off-centered middle. A new space seems to emerge that is more open for multiplicity and polyphony, thereby encouraging the other participants to be answerable in joining the multi-voiced dialogue. Being answerable is about taking ownership and responsibility of one’s own actions instead of hiding by being passive or pretending (Bakhtin, 1999, p. 41). Without answerability, the variety, alternations, shadings, and gradations are lost, and the dialogue becomes empty and dead.

Furthermore, the story illuminates Bakhtin’s conception of the open ended, unmerging, and creative dialogue. In the beginning of the story, the forces in play seem to sharpen the differences, tighten counter positions, and polarize the relationship resulting in self- and other centering. When Sarah starts to work off-centered, a creative heteroglossic dialogue and understanding seems to emerge as the centrifugal forces continue to disrupt the centripetal ones, thereby preventing the meeting from closing in on Peter’s decision without further exploration.

Even though Peter and Sarah have gradually moved off-center, this does not imply the resolution of contradictions and tensions as in the dialectical merger. On the contrary, contradictions continue to emerge and create tensions between them. It therefore makes sense to conceive of their unity and contradictions as “as an eternal harmony of unmerged voices or as their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel” (Bakhtin, 1984).

Reading Hegel and Bakhtin through each other, an important difference appears that matters to our conception of the prefix ‘counter’. In dialectical betweenness, the counter demarcates the contradictions between self and other, which are overcome through the dialectical merger. In dialogue, relational selves emerge on the boundary (Gurevitch, 2001). In fact, there is no counter, no single sovereign territory, and no monads, meaning that the concept of a boundary may be a faulty metaphor (Morson & Emerson, 1990). Still, Bakhtin does speak of contradictions and counter-arguments. In dialogue, it therefore makes sense to conceive of the counter and the boundaries as living, dynamical, and in flux. Integrating this point into the triad storytelling framework, this chapter therefore suggests distinguishing between narratives-counter-narratives and living stories – counter-stories. While dialectics is associated with the encounter between narratives and counter-narratives, it makes sense to associate dialogue with the encounter between living stories and counter-stories as visualized in Figure 3.1.
The contribution of dialogical perspective to the triad storytelling framework is summarized in Figure 3.4.

The antenarrative middle – creating a free space for multiplicity and polyphony

In the triad storytelling framework, the antenarrative process aims to bridge the gap between narratives and living stories: “antenarrative processes perform a transformation of stories into narratives, and narratives into stories, and therefore are in between” (Boje, 2014, p. 71). The concept of antenarratives is thus a way of conceptualizing the dynamic relationship between narratives and living stories. The research ambition of the antenarrative approach is to enlighten how lived experience and living stories are assimilated into narratives, as well as how the rise of struggling counter-narratives and micro living stories are challenging dominant narratives (Rosile et al., 2013).

The dynamic relationship between N-CN and their dialogical realm are also addressed in Bamberg’s research. According to Bamberg, the interactive realm constitutes “the territory where counter as well as master-narratives emerge in co-presence and as discursive process” (Bamberg,
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2004, p. 353). Narratives and counter-narrative impact everyday interaction, as they are employed to make claims on identities and positions, to give guidance and direction to the everyday actions of subjects, to normalize and naturalize, and to constrain and delineate their agency. Conversely, the interactive realm of everyday interactions, the small stories, constitutes the ongoing fabric of counter–narratives (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). The interplay gives rise to the construct narratives-in-interaction (Bamberg, 2004, pp. 351, 360).

In order to further enlighten the dynamical relationship between narratives and living stories and the role of ‘counter’ in these dynamics, this chapter proposes to make a distinction between counter-narratives and counter-stories, which are otherwise used interchangeably (e.g. by Andrews, 2004, p. 2). Viewed from a dialectical dialogical storytelling perspective, the two types of counter are connected to each other through a dynamical antenarrative relationship. On the one hand, antenarratives disrupt the dialectical process leading to narratives – counter-narratives, thereby disentangling the polarized centers of self and other and expanding multiplicity and polyphony. On the other hand, antenarratives simultaneously reweave the appearing fragments and threads of stories and narratives, thereby paving a way for “a future that would not otherwise be" (Boje, 2008, pp. 13–14).

To some extent, Sarah’s story reflects an antenarrative approach. What makes it antenarrative is her way of working towards the future through embodied and reflexive sensemaking and experimental actions. Planning her experiments, she has no certain knowledge of how Peter or the other team members would respond but still allows herself to be led by her senses and intuitions. Hence, she is moving beyond the petrified narrative-counter-narrative constructions of their relationship. Each experiment is a bet on how to improve the relationship between herself and Peter, as well as the work of the leadership group. Because she cares about this, she is determined in carrying out these experiments and thereby actualizing the becoming of a better future. To accomplish this, she tries to move beneath the narrative – counter-narrative constructions and create a space that is open to the polyphonic voices. Withholding her own as well as Peter’s polarizing voices, she uses the voices of the other group members to off-center the interaction. By trying to restore the balance between centripetal and centrifugal forces, she disrupts narrative and counter-narrative coherence and keeps the communicative process open before new narrative cohesion. Sarah’s approach may therefore reveal how antenarratives can help to bridge the gap between N-CN and LS-CS and eventually to transform the relation between petrified narratives-counter-narratives.

Viewed through the lenses of the dialectical dialogical storytelling framework, Sarah’s story throws some light upon the antenarrative connection between N-CN and LS-CS. If the balance between the centripetal and centrifugal forces of LS-CS is disrupted at the expense of the centrifugal forces, the centripetal forces of everyday interactions may give rise to a polarizing movement, prompting N-CN constructions. These constructions may dominate, restrain, guide, and shape real-life interactions. At the same time, the polarizing movement can be disrupted or broken down if the centrifugal forces move back into play and restore the off-centered dynamics of LS-CS.

The antenarrative approach thus contributes to informing the relationship between dialectics and dialogues with regard to how dialectics is born out of dialogue and returned to dialogue at a higher level (Bakhtin, 1987c, p. 162). Conversely, the dialectical dialogical perspective contributes to enriching our understanding of the dynamics of the triad storytelling framework, as well as the role of antenarratives.

The aforementioned example of Sarah is limited to its microlevel of interaction, as well as to the single-voiced perspective of Sarah. The case story does not contextualize the political organizational environment or tell the story of Peter’s perspective or of other voices. Still, the example
may shed some light on the antenarrative interplay between political controlling forces working towards the suppression of otherness, as well as ethical struggles striving for a free space for action, speech, and conversations (Gurevitch, 2001).

The contribution of the chapter

In this chapter, a dialectical dialogical perspective has been applied to storytelling organizations. The dialectical dialogical storytelling perspective contributes to distinguishing between N-CN and LS-CS. The distinction is useful for the purpose of better understanding the complexity of the dynamics of storytelling organizations.

The dialectical betweenness of contradictory N-CN is visualized as D1 in Figure 3.1, whereas the tense dissensus of LS-CS is visualized as D2. The abstract dualistic contradictions of N-CN are transformed through the dialectical merger across the polarized middle. The tensed dissensus of LS-CS emerges in the dialogical middle, which is kept open for potentially expanding multiplicity and polyphony. Without merging, the different horizons are transgressed, thereby giving rise to creativity and to the appearance of something new. In the chapter, it is argued that both types of dynamics contribute to the complex dynamics of a fragmented, diversified, struggling, and unresting organizational whole.

Based upon the work of Bamberg and Boje, N-CN and LS-CS are conceived of as in an interaction with one another. Antenarratives concern the resolution of their gap while shaping and creating the organizational future; they constitute the connecting arc between the two counters. On the one hand, antenarratives unravel and disentangle the N-CN, breaking diversity down into two poles. On the other, antenarratives reweave the various fragments of stories and narratives, thereby antenarrating the future of the organization.

Inspired by Bakhtin, the antenarrative middle is conceived of as working in the midst of the heteroglossic process of balancing the centripetal and centrifugal forces of dialectical dialogue. Subsequently, antenarratives disturb and disrupt the polarizing process, while creating a more open space striving for expanded multiplicity and polyphony. The case study of Sarah provides a practical example of how to approach the antenarrative middle through off-centering.

The main contribution of the chapter is therefore three-fold. First, the distinction between counter-narratives and living counter stories enriches our meta-theoretical conceptualization of the complexity of storytelling dynamics. Second, the conceptualization of the antenarrative middle bridges the gap between N-CN and LS-CS through dialectical dialogical storytelling. Third, the chapter examines the identification of four types of middles, each of which play a role in the dynamics of storytelling organizations: the excluded, dialectical, and dialogical middle, as well as the antenarrative middle. In this chapter, it is suggested that the management of storytelling organizations needs to be conscious of these middles as the nature of their performative and constitutive dynamics differ essentially. In this chapter, it is suggested that managing the four middles is a managerial task.

References


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