

Article Introduction:

The following paper, written by Salvador Barragan and Albert Mills, was presented at ASB in 2008. The 2008 conference was held at Memorial University in St. John's, NL. The paper relies on interviews of ASB participants to understand how these participants construct notions of the conference. Barragan and Mills note three categories of 'believers' in the ASB conference – true believers, pragmatic believers, and sceptical believers, who construct ASB as either legitimate and enjoyable, useful, or illegitimate, respectively. Thirteen years after the original presentation of this paper, it would be interesting to see how feelings have changed for the participants!

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**NARRATING THE ASB CONFERENCE: HOW THE CONFERENCE IS SOCIALLY
CONSTRUCTED THROUGH THE TIME¹**

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Abstract

One view for studying organizations is that they are socially constructed through language. We focus on how some members of the ASB conference constructed this organization, its legitimacy and themselves through their narratives.

Introduction & Theoretical Framework

The Atlantic School of Businesses (ASB) conference has been running since 1970 in Canada and it has been held at different universities across Atlantic Canada (Mills, 2005). The recently formed executive committee launched the ASB history project in order to create a memory of one of the oldest academic business conferences in Canada (ASB Renewal, 2008). As a result, several papers have been published in the proceedings of ASB and other conferences, and in some academic journals (e.g. Long, 2006; Long, Pyper and Rostis, 2008; McLaren, 2008; Murray, 2007; Pyper, 2007; Yue et al., 2007). Probably, these documents constitute the only textual evidence of the conference's history. We add to this project by analyzing how members of this organization construct both the ASB conference and themselves through the narratives they enact to make sense of their participation, the conference itself, and its legitimacy. We adopt an interpretive perspective to approach this study.

Social scientists have been studying organizations from a positivist perspective, adopting the view that the real world is out there and we have to discover it (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). However, other scholars have approached the study of organizations from an interpretivist tradition (Prasad, 2005), in which inter-subjective interpretations of the world become fixed and “eventually acquired a ‘natural’ existence” (p. 16). In this tradition, what is important is not to discover the ‘real’ organization, but how the organization is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and how its members make sense of it and of themselves (Weick, 1995; 2001).

Some of the previous studies on ASB have taken a social constructionist perspective. For instance, Campbell (2007) uses the Curriculum Vitae as textual evidence to construct the conference due to the lack of documented rules and procedures, which re-produce the organization (Putnam & Cooren, 2004). Long (2006) asked scholars from the Atlantic provinces who have or have not participated at ASB to construct mission statements of the conference. In doing so, these scholars construct ASB in a way that enhances the reputation of the conference and themselves. Murray (2007) focuses on interviewing young scholars who construct their own identities as academics by interacting in this conference with more established academics. McLaren (2008) identifies multiple discourses in relation to the awards at ASB using interviews. We contribute to this social constructionist and interpretivist scholarship by offering a narrative analysis of several interview-stories that our participants tell about ASB. These narratives construct, in different degrees, the legitimacy of the conference and the interviewed participants.

Social Construction of Organizations: Narrating the Organization

Social constructivists contend that reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and it is through language that individuals create their world (Rorty, 1989). From this tradition, scholars study

organizations through how organizational realities are constructed (Prasad, 2005) by organizational members who make sense of their experiences retrospectively (Weick 1995; 2001). Therefore, it is through language that social structures and identities are produced and reproduced (Fairclough, 1993). In other words, language is a means by which members construct the organizations in which they are involved. This construction does not occur in isolation. Collectives engage in the construction of what organizations are (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) by the process of 'legitimation' (p.86), in which explanation and justifications of reality are integrated and negotiated. For our purposes, people that have participated at ASB make sense of their participation, share and negotiate these meanings with other participants, and produce and reproduce a sense of legitimacy of this conference. Ultimately, they objectified reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). A member of the executive committee of ASB put it this way:

It is weird that the ASB people talk about it like it was a university or an institution or an organization. But it didn't have any hallmarks of an organization. The president was there by happenstance. These individuals [former presidents] were adopting those roles and were not hired. Individuals were volunteering. So it was all ad hoc. Well you can't have 30+ years of bringing [things] together for a purpose and go away without something else going on. So there's something else there. It's just like people wanting to get involved, people wanting an outlet, people wanting a forum to meet locally. I don't know who founded it. I don't think there was a founder. They just had a conference and it happened another 35 times. But there had to be something, we don't know. There are no records. Everyone knew what you were talking about and had a feeling about it one way or the other, they did or they didn't like it. So everybody was treating it like a thing that existed, but you couldn't point to it, you couldn't touch it (Interview 5 by Salvador Barragan; June 23, 2008).

This excerpt shows how the narrator considers that some people treat the ASB as a 'thing' or 'something that is there', like real. Even people have a 'feeling about it' or an attitude towards it: they 'did or didn't like it'. However, 'you couldn't touch it', it is a reification of experiences and conversations that people have: 'everybody knew what you were talking about'. In this sense, organizations are 'networks of conversations' (Ford 1999, p. 485), meaning the ASB conference may be a network of several conversations or narratives among actors. Therefore, these narratives can be described as 'a form not only of representing but of constituting reality' (Bruner 1991, p.5) and in this case, constituting the ASB conference and its legitimacy. Narratives are especially important for the relevance of self-identity in modernity (Giddens, 1991). For example, identity is 'no longer viewed as given..., individuals must now construct who they are and how they want to be known, just as groups, organizations, and governments do' (Reissman 2008, p.7). Thus, it's through the enactment (Weick 1995) of these narratives that participants construct the ASB, its legitimacy and the identities of its members.

Organizations have been represented with different metaphors, of which machines and organisms are often the most common (Morgan, 2006). Czarniawska (1997) reminded us that another commonly used metaphor is the "Organization as super-person" or "Organization man" (p. 41). Organizations have been constructed as individuals, sharing some human characteristics such as personal identity. Therefore, organizational members may refer to an organization as if it has an identity. In this sense "it is useful to treat identity as a narrative...as a continuous process of narration where both the narrator and the audience are involved in formulating, editing,

applauding, and refusing various elements of the ever-produced narrative” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 49). Narrative is defined as “the constitutive process by which human beings order their conceptions of self and of the world around them” (Worthington, 1996, p. 13) and it is “the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). Therefore, what is important is not if the narration is a fair interpretation of reality, but rather its meaning (Gabriel, 2000).

There has been discrepancy about the differences between a narrative and a story. For Gabriel (2000), stories have “resonant plots and characters, involving narrative skills, entailing risk, and aiming to entertain, persuade, and win over” (p. 22); while for Boje (1991), “people told stories in bits and pieces, with excessive interruptions of story parts, with people talking over each other to share story fragments, and many aborted storytelling attempts” (pp.112–113). For our purposes, we will treat narrative and story as interchangeable as is done elsewhere (Hopkinson, 2003; Reissman, 2008). Weick (1995) tells us that storytelling is a process of making sense of experiences and events and for that “what is necessary...is a good story” (Weick, 1995, p. 61). In addition, Söderberg (2003) proposes five characteristics that a good narrative should have based on Bruner (1991): accounts of an event occurring over time, retrospective interpretations based on past experiences, focusing on human action, part of identity construction process, and co-authored by the audience. For our purposes, we anticipated that members of this conference would narrate their experiences retrospectively and would construct themselves, as well as the ASB, and these narrations would be co-authored by a specific audience: the researcher and the attendees to the ASB conference where this paper will be presented. In this sense, this “situated talk enacts broader social structures in the form of organizational and institutional identities” (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004, p. 160), including the legitimacy as an academic conference.

Traditionally, identity has been defined as something central, distinctive, and the enduring characteristics of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). However, this view has been contested (Brown, 2006). Similarly, Martin et al., (1983) study unique organizational culture in organizations and argue that the culture may not be unique. In fact, storytelling in organizations reveals differentiated and fragmented perspectives on organizational meanings and values (Martin, 1992). Similarly, official stories of organizations may not be unique, as presented in the ‘official story’ which can be told or can be expressed on the internet, in the press, and annual reports (Söderberg, 2003). However, there are different interpretations of it within the same organization. In this way, an organization may be defined as something that is always in the state of ‘becoming’ (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). As stated by Foucault (1986), individuals may resist control (e.g., impositions of identity) in everyday interactions such as enacting counter-narratives (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). The narrative approach allows adopting “a polyphonic understanding of the world” (Söderberg, 2003). For instance, David Boje’s (1995) study of stories in Disney reveals that the traditional company’s history of a happy family has been contested by other silenced stories of employees and Walt Disney’s close collaborators. Therefore, we expect that the stories enacted by ASB members may be fragmented rather than one unique and shared story. Consequently, it is possible that the social construction of ASB and its legitimacy may be unique, differentiated, or fragmented (Martin, 1992). In other words, the narratives of the participants of this conference will form a collection of multi-voice stories that construct a polyphonic organization (Fairclough, 1992; Hazen 1993) due to the plurality of voices (Brown, 2006). These voices construct the conference in different ways by attributing to it more or less legitimacy, and in this way the participants construct themselves as more or less supportive of this organization.

Methodology

We use the narrative approach (Reissman, 2008), in order to enact stories about the ASB conference. These stories will be treated as the physical evidence of language due to the lack of written narratives about ASB. In addition, Patriotta (2003) suggests that narratives contain organizational memory and Reissman (2008) points out that interviews are helpful to “generate detailed accounts” (p. 23). In this way, we asked questions that invite participants to narrate freely their own view and the view of other scholars on ASB, their experiences in different roles they took, their experience in other academic conferences, their own explanations for the long history of ASB, and the future of this conference. The aim of these questions was to “open topics and allow respondents to construct answers in ways they find meaningful” (Reissman, 2008, p. 25). Our purpose was to intervene as little as possible during the interviews and to follow Gabriel’s (2000) advice of becoming “a fellow-traveler on a narrative” (p. 32).

We follow the approach suggested by Reissman (2008): interviewing, transcribing, and co-producing. Similarly, Czarniawska (2002) notes that the interviews are a site for narrative production and the editing a site for co-production. Thus, we participate in the narrative production since “by listening and questioning in particular ways, we critically shape the stories participants choose to tell” (Reissman, 2008, p. 50). In other words, we first edited the interviews to form the narratives by eliminating the interviewer’s questions, co-editing the answers in narrative form, cleaning the narrative (e.g. the phrase “you know what I mean” was eliminated, interviewer interruptions, etc), and setting the boundaries of each narrative as suggested by Reissman (1993, 2008). Each participant enacted more than one story or narrative and we categorized them based on the main theme(s). We also categorized the narratives based on the narrator’s support to and involvement with the conference, according to the degree of legitimacy attributed by the narration, the encouragement to others to be involved, and the intention to participate in the future. In this tradition and under the narrative approach, it is difficult to provide validity and reliability recipes as those used in quantitative research. The validity of the stories told by participants and the story told by the researchers has to be replaced by “persuading the audiences about the trustworthiness” of the collected narratives and the interpretation (Reissman, 2008, p. 186). However, once we categorized each narrative by theme and by narrator’s support, we did a second round of categorization of narratives to see whether they fit into those previous categories.

The interviewees were selected from a list that was initially originated from a broader research study focused on the history of ASB. For this paper, we analyzed 12 interviews that were conducted not only by one of the authors, but also by other researchers involved in the broader project. The profiles of the interviewees are shown on Appendix 1, where a summary of their academic position, their affiliation, the roles that they took at ASB, and the period of involvement. The majority were interviewed face-to-face at their own university, and some were interviewed by phone.

Discussion

The 12 interviews generated around 30 narratives. As noted elsewhere (Gabriel, 2000), some stories were richer than others in terms of better plots and not just presenting factual descriptions. We found close to 20

different themes and each narrative was assigned more than one theme, if necessary. When we checked again if the narratives fit into those categories, it was easier to see how a broader category or theme was better. Ultimately, we ended up with ten broader themes as shown on table 1.

Table 1: Themes of the Narratives

No.	Themes	No. of Narratives
1	Regional Conference	11
2	Friendly & Supportive	10
3	Legitimacy of the Conference	10
4	Hosting the Conference & Sense of Obligation	8
5	Comparison with Other Conferences	7
6	First Time at ASB	7
7	Formal Structure & Future	7
8	New Scholars/ Teaching Researchers	7
9	Networking & Sharing Experience	5
10	Working Ideas	4

The three more common themes were the *regional conference*, *the friendliness and supportiveness*, and *the legitimacy of the conference*. The *friendliness and supportiveness of the conference* theme has a shared meaning in almost every narrative that mentioned it, as one of the central characteristics of the ASB. On the other hand, a *regional conference* theme has a variety of meanings. Sometimes it was referred as something too local and small, and with less importance, and some other times, it was referred as something that promotes the second most mentioned theme: the *friendliness and supportiveness*. Similar to these contradictory meanings, the theme *legitimacy of the conference* represented different things for different narrators. For some, the legitimacy of the conference is justified by the good feedback, the subsequent publication in a journal, or the fact that some scholars presented papers also at other national or international conferences, and the peer review nature of the conference. At the same time, for some narrators the conference is not legitimate due to the fact that some established scholars, committees for promotion, and Deans do not recommend or recognize it. *Comparison with other conferences* was referred as being better than other national or international conferences in terms of feedback, collegiality, friendliness, supportiveness, involvement, interest of the audience, and less aggressive and competitive, on one hand. On the other, ASB was compared as not being as rigorous, legitimate, and recognized as the other conferences mentioned before. *The first time* at ASB usually was a nice, surprisingly good experience, with a friendly environment. This theme was presented also with the theme of good venue for *new scholars* or scholars that have teaching, but not much research experience, especially in the Atlantic region. It is also stated that the conference is legitimate for *new scholars*. *Networking and sharing experience* is also related to the theme

regional because it may help scholars share ideas for teaching and be in contact with researchers in their fields, due to the small size of some the Atlantic universities. *Hosting the conference & sense of obligation* has different connotations such as obligation, pressure to conform, duty, a need, an opportunity, or a contribution.

Our analysis also focused on categorizing the members by their narratives in terms of support to ASB and the legitimacy that they attributed to the organization. We categorized them as: the *true believers*, the *pragmatic believers*, and the *skeptical believers*. Each of them constructed ASB in a different way as shown on the negative or positive connotations of the themes explained before. For instance, they differ on the degree of both the “affection” towards ASB and the belief of the legitimacy of ASB for career advancement in the academic profession, in comparison with other national or international conferences. We show only a few selected extracts of the narratives for space reasons.

True believers

In this narrative, the ASB event is constructed like a holiday, a time to catch up with friends who share an interest in research. There is a comparison with other conferences, in which the questions at ASB seem to be more challenging and the narrator constructs herself as someone that not only presents papers at ASB, but also at the Academy of Management (AoM) or the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada (ASAC). In doing so, she establishes the legitimacy of ASB. She shows affection and respect for this conference.

It's like Christmas

[Probably they think] I'm really crazy, but it's like Christmas for me. I really love the people that I've met on the PhD program, but I never get to see them anymore. ASB is like the time when I have a weekend to go crazy and catch up with everybody. Like 'what paper are you working on?' but at ASB we're not ... competing for each other's time. The session that I was in at ASAC was really good, but I've been on other sessions at the Academy of Management where the ... audience was not as involved in my paper. I presented my paper and I had one question, two questions and they weren't hard questions, like they were just like, scratching the surface of the paper. But at ASB, every paper I have presented at ASB, the questions that I have gotten were grueling. They were like really challenging (*Interview 8 by Salvador Barragan; June 26, 2008*).

Below, we have a narrator that retrospectively made sense of his experiences at this conference and what that has meant to him in terms of professional development: publishing in a top-tier journal and receiving nurturing support to develop working ideas. He attributes a human attitude to ASB, which is different than the attitude of ASAC. He establishes the legitimacy of the conference by his publication in a journal, the support he receives and at the same time he shows his continuing support by presenting papers there.

My first time

The first time I went to ASB was shortly after my MBA. I presented a paper, which actually was the very first paper I ever presented at a conference. And we won a “best paper award” and that paper eventually got published in a tier 1 journal and

... so my introduction to ASB was pretty positive. Ever since then, I presented one paper per conference. I used it as ... an opportunity just to think and talk about ... some ideas that I was working on, rather than to present finished research. ASB has the right kind of attitude, which is developmental ... a little bit more laid back and it's a little bit more ... 'let's hear what you have to say' rather than the kind of ... view that is ASAC, quite competitive and I, as I say, I don't, I don't enjoy that nature of the conference, it's not as nurturing (*Interview 6 by Salvador Barragan; June 26, 2008*).

The third narrator below compares ASB with ASAC and AoM. For him, the quality of the conferences is not different; the only thing that differs is the attitude that scholars have towards ASB and the numbers. He establishes the legitimacy of ASB by saying that those who present at ASB also present at other conferences as he has done. They have books and textbooks published. He also considers that the age of ASB and ASAC are comparable, so the quality should not be different.

Legitimacy

I've been to EGOS and ASAC and the Standing Conference on Organization Studies (SCOS) and a bunch of others, those conferences aren't any ... better than ASB. In the Academy of Management 7000 papers [are presented], so at ASB we're talking about 100 papers. ASB is a peer review conference, but there's this taken for granted assumption that it's small. There's ASAC and ASB in Canada. ASB is just as old as ASAC, probably older. People who present at ASB present at the Academy of Management and have written textbooks or books. So, there doesn't seem to be a significant difference between ASB and ASAC, other than the attitude that we have towards ASB. You have a generation of scholars who were pressured to publish in top tier journals. Then, when they grow up to be senior researchers bringing up other students and they tell them: 'You've got to publish in the Academy of Management. That's what they did for me, that's what I [do] for you.' The Academy of Management has only been around for 50 years, it started with 7 people. Well, ASB has been around for 35 years, which is close to 50. So, the Academy of Management starts in a country with 10 times the population of Canada, 10 times the scholarship. So there is no substantive reason for why ASB is not as [the same] quality as ASAC or [as] the Academy of Management, just smaller numbers (*Interview 5 by Salvador Barragan; June 23, 2008*).

Pragmatic believers

The narrator below supports the conference and has had a great experience there. However, she has not been for a few years. She encourages young scholars to go for learning purposes, but she doesn't attribute the same legitimacy as ASAC has. She constructs ASB as a friendly atmosphere and good for networking.

A great place to cut your teeth

I haven't been to ASB in a few years now...but as a new faculty member, I found it a great introduction into the conference world. So my memories of were that it was a great place to cut your teeth and try out some new ideas, but it was pretty low risk and fairly friendly in terms of the atmosphere...not, I wouldn't have categorized it as a high level conference. It is a regional conference, but a good place to learn. It's useful for younger faculty members and a good place to network, to see what jobs were available in the region. There was rigor there, but I wouldn't say that it was at the level of some of the American conferences and it's certainly not at ASAC level (*Interview 11, by Salvador Barragan; July 22, 2008*).

In the case below, we also have partial support for the conference by encouraging new researchers use it as a starting point. However, at some point they have to fly and go to national or international conferences. She is also pragmatic in the sense that going to ASB is less expensive for people in Atlantic Canada in terms of transportation.

It's time for you to move on

I encourage people to go especially for new faculty because it's less expensive than flying. Most of the time, you can drive wherever you are going, except (Memorial) we always have to fly. It's a good starting point. So...I never discourage someone [to go], but I have at some point to say 'it's time for you to move on, but it is time for you to go to something national or international'. Most people don't want to appear to be stupid ... or not knowledgeable in front of their peers so ... there is an increased pressure on them if you go to a national or international conference (*Interview 2, by Salvador Barragan; June 15, 2008*).

Skeptical believers

The next narrator compares the career of a researcher with the career of a hockey player by establishing the difference between attending a farm team (very low in the scale) and attending the NHL (the maximum place to play). In this sense, he uses the tiered system belief in academia to rate ASB in comparison with ASAC and AoM and attributes a lower legitimacy to ASB. He does not support ASB and is questioning himself the need for this conference for Atlantic Canada.

The farm team versus the National leagues

The conferences are ... on a tiered system and ASB is the bottom tier conference and the top tier is the Academy of Management, and ASAC, is the middle tier. People are looking for bigger conferences. It's like... you're trying to make the NHL, it's your goal to be a professional hockey player and you can't make it so you play in the farm leagues. If you don't have to play in the farm leagues, and you can get to the NHL, you're going to skip those farm leagues. And a lot of the PhD students are skipping the farm leagues. I'm not sure how much the other universities

in Atlantic Canada support it? How much do they really care? (*Interview 3, by Salvador Barragan; June 16, 2008*).

Similarly, the next narrator attributes a lower legitimacy to ASB by not presenting papers there, by saying that he will try to send papers to other national or international conferences, and by paying attention to what his Dean would say about ASB.

God forbid if you send it to ASB

*What I did is acted as a division chair...I'm not sure that I ever submitted papers to ASB...because usually if I had done 2 or 3 papers in a year, then I was sending maybe this one to Academy and this one to ASAC and this one to maybe EGOS and ASB would not be on the map...but it's hard to sort of denigrate the conference. And usually, the Dean basically said, 'You know, if you're going to get a paper, you're going to get it into Academy, I'll be much more impressed with that than if you send it to ASAC and, God forbid, if you send it to ASB' (*Interview 10, by Salvador Barragan; July 22, 2008*).*

Conclusions

Narrating the ASB conference through the lenses of different people provide us with multiple “windows into organizational life” (Gabriel, 2000, p .29). We found a polyphonic organization, constructed in different ways. It was like the ‘Tamara-land’ described by Boje (1995) in which people observed a variety of plays and endings under the same theater and the same play. For the case of the ASB, we should follow Czarniawska’s (1997) advice that “organizational autobiographies” should not be treated as the “history of the company” but to treat them as “lives under construction” (p. 53). In this way, the social constructionist view that we took, helps us not only to discover the organization that is out there, but also to see how some participants of this conference in different periods of time, from different universities, and with different academic ranks, and roles at the conference constructed this institution (Berger& Luckmann, 1966), especially its legitimacy as an academic conference for the Atlantic region. These narrators also construct themselves as *true, pragmatic, and skeptical believers* in ASB and they ultimately contributed to the re-production of what this conference is in their eyes.

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Appendix 1 – Profile of the Interviewees

Universities	No.
Saint Mary's	3
Mount Saint Vincent University	2
Acadia University	3
Memorial	2
University of New Brunswick	2
Total	12

Academic Positions	No.
PhD students	2
ABDs	1
Assistant Professors	3
Associate Professors	2
Full Professors	2
Ex-Deans	2
Total	12

Level of Participation at ASB				
Presenter	Chair/Diyn	Reviewer	Volunteer	No.
x	x	x	x	4
x	x	x		1
x				1
x			x	1
	x			2
x		x	x	2
x		x		1
Total				12

Period of Involvement	
70s - 80s	1
80s - 90s	2
90s - 20s	5
present	9
Total	17*

* More than 12 due to participation in more than 1 period