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## Review of Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory

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Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory. Charlotte Linde. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

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Linde's book fills a much needed niche in the literature for applied anthropologists who study work. The book illuminates the process by which she collected, analyzed, and theorized her data. Anthropologists who work with, and in, institutions will find this book insightful. Linde's background as a linguistic anthropologist, and her extensive experience as an applied ethnographer, allows her to illustrate how to effectively work with narrative.

Linde bases her work on a three-year study done at the cusp of the new century in MidWest, a seventy-five-year-old multiline insurance company. That work was done while Linde was employed by IRL, the Institute for Research on Learning; she was part of a team brought in by Midwest to help them understand an organizational puzzle. The company was experiencing a transition to new economic rules, facing new competitors, and needed to create a buffer by selling more life insurance in relation to the less profitable auto and property insurance. However, their sales agents, who functioned as independent contractors, preferred to concentrate on auto and property insurance. The company sought to understand the social basis for the decisions being made by their agents.

The book strikes a superb balance between organization and lateral thinking. Each topic builds logically on the previous one, yet the examples, particularly the cross-cultural ones, are provocative and creative. Linde sets up the problem to be explored in "How Institutions Remember," by defining the key notions of the book--institution, memory, and the difficult task

of parsing who is remembering and how collective knowledge is created, edited and maintained. Her second chapter makes the data gathering process transparent. Linde explores the problematical nature of life insurance sales, which closes practical and moral challenges, as variously understood by management and the independent contractor agents. The company was offering a new contract for agents that pushed life insurance sales. Agents with an established connection could choose to stay with their old contracts, modify them or adopt the new deal. The contested nature of the adoption revealed the underlying structural dilemmas between management and the agents.

The next four chapters weave together oral and written narratives with a careful linguistic analysis. Linde examines diverse events, some designed for remembering, such as retirement parties, and others used to remember, such as annual meetings. Institutional memory consists of “ongoing activities, as well as its buildings, its file cabinets, its location in a larger net of laws and regulations” (53). Places and artifacts embody the stories and are occasions for narration. Linde notes that “social life is an ocean of stories, and life within institutions is no exception” (72). In these chapters she does not just gather stories, but carefully analyzes which ones inform the larger narrative of the institution. Origin or founder stories, such as the ones about MidWest’s Mr. McBee, go well beyond the experience of individual people, but create a collective framework for expressing distinctive organizational values and activities. They create a common identity, “The Story of Us” (81). MidWest’s story is connected to a larger business narrative, especially in relation to how this insurance company thinks about risk. Another key notion, memorialized in stories, is the birth of the full-time agent, linked inexorably to customer loyalty. Provocatively, Linde contrasts narratives by contractor agents, employees and managers. She then contrasts the position of the narrators, the linguistic differences in word

choice, syntax and evidentiality, demonstrating how elastic stories can be in institutional memory. Nostalgia is established in the stories, but it can also subtly lay the groundwork for critique.

In chapter seven, Linde launches one of her most significant themes in the book, the power of the “Paradigmatic Narratives, Exemplary Narratives of Everyman.” The “paradigmatic narrative” creates a framework for partial stories, quotidian examples of career navigation and work experiences that demonstrate that “individual stories can become institutionalized for general use” (Linde 2001:620). In MidWest, such narratives revealed the changing career paths available to contracting agents, and the shift of the locus of power to the company. These narratives demonstrated that the problem that enticed the company to bring in anthropologists-- why the agents seemed so resistant to the new objectives of the company--was rooted in social motivation. The incentive structure developed for the old independent agent model did not align with the company’s emerging goals. This was particularly evident for people who did not categorically fit the commonly framed trajectory--women and minorities.

The next two chapters, “Narrative and Intertextuality, Telling One’s Own Story within a Textual Community,” and “Noisy Silences, Stories not Told,” demonstrate the analytical sophistication of this book. Chapter eight explores the social context of agent recruitment, often from families that already are in the company, and how they learn how to tell their own story as part of a larger epic narrative. The most important agent identity narratives are that they are independent, entrepreneurial, and part of a larger company family. These identities are increasingly contested by the new contract. While critique is uttered, rarely, it is most often manifest in the noisy silences of topics avoided. The skill to hear the noisy silences is one of the most precious in our ethnographic toolkit. Who gets to “speak for” the institution, and whose

account would be considered a rude imposition? What events, such as the antidiscrimination lawsuit, are omitted from the discussions of how and why the organization became more diverse? How does the uneasy unofficial talk about “monarchism,” the fact that only two families have run the company in seventy-five years, contrast with the other founder narratives? The penultimate chapter offers a clear path for capturing the counterstories that reveal institutional power structures. After pulling together the threads of the book in the concluding chapter, “Working the Past, identity and Memory,” Linde makes it clear that this book is not just a book about an insurance company, but one that asserts that institutional identity takes work, work that is done through narrative and memory.

This work contains significant assets that should put it on the library shelves of applied anthropologists, whether novice or seasoned. Linde is a wide-ranging intellectual, well-read in cross-cultural comparisons and thoughtful about all aspects of her own life and work. She’s created a very readable book, which combines the rigor of data gathering and clear logical thought with reflexivity and nuanced sensibility. She has made transparent the workings of the team approach, in which multiple people can observe, listen, carefully document, and think clearly about the evidence. Her analysis is transparent, meticulous, reflexive and humane. She models the integration of data gathered in the context of applied anthropology with sophisticated theorization. For many anthropologists of work, this consolidation is a vital goal. In the words of Marietta Baba, “a profession cannot be competitive in the 21st century with theory-practice ‘apartheid’. We need the power that derives from their integration, joined with that of our imagination” (2005: 213). *Working The Past* contributes significantly to the corpus of examples from which we can draw.

## References

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