

Exploring the Construction of Transparency: An Analysis of Health Managers' Narratives

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Many characteristics of the health sector such as information asymmetry, complex payment systems, and professional discretion, make it vulnerable to the abuse of power. Transparency is intended to mitigate these risks by providing clarity on the rules and results of health care delivery processes and by revealing interests and motivations of health care providers and policy makers. But before a culture of transparency can take root in organizations, it is important to understand how people perceive transparency and enact it in their organizational roles. How do managers interpret and label actions and events as transparent or non-transparent? This formative research study proposes a framework and research methods for exploring transparency in organizations. The study elicited 21 stories about transparent behavior and categorized them by type, such as “dissatisfied observer,” “reluctant discloser” and “moral dilemma discloser,” illustrating aspects of transparency and perceived benefits and drawbacks. Through narrative analysis, researchers can better understand attitudes and beliefs about transparency held by key stakeholders. This information can then be used in the design of policies and behavior change strategies to promote effective governance.

INTRODUCTION

Board members and management teams in public and private organizations occupy positions of trust, responsible for exercising power in pursuit of collective interests. Whether the groups whose interests they represent are citizens or shareholders, employees or donors, the governance structures of these organizations require that officials do not abuse their power or positions for personal gain. Ethical governance is judged by the standards of transparency, accountability, and fairness. When transparency standards are not met it impedes communication and can result in bad organizational decisions and poor performance.¹ Transparency is thus seen as an essential lever to promote accountability and increase stakeholder engagement.² Yet, transparency can cause tension, especially in organizations accustomed to hierarchical power structures and ways of communicating. The visibility and sharing of power which transparency entails may feel like an unnecessary burden or an intrusion of privacy. Individuals seeking to increase transparency may confront resistance to change which can derail reform efforts.

The purpose of this formative study was to better understand how officials perceive “transparency” and enact it in their organizational roles, information which can be used to design more effective governance reforms and monitor their implementation. The aim was to develop a framework and research methods for exploring transparency in global health organizations. The methods presented in

this study can be applied to improve transparency in international settings, especially where perceptions of transparency and good governance may not be well understood and hidden barriers may be thwarting efforts to increase transparency. Narrative analysis techniques were applied in the setting of a community health center to understand how health managers perceive and value transparency in their organizational lives. Questions were designed to explore situational transparency, what dimensions managers thought were important, and how they would identify and explain transparency-related attitudes and behaviors.

BACKGROUND

Transparency in governance is getting increasing attention globally. Transparency International (TI) began promoting transparency in 1993 as a way to prevent corruption in elections, public administration, procurement, and businesses worldwide. Other international and national initiatives, including the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (eiti.org), Publish What You Pay campaign (www.publishwhatyoupay.org), India's "I paid a bribe" web site (ipaidabribe.com) and the International Budget Project have promoted transparency by designing monitoring tools, carrying out systematic assessments, and promoting civil society engagement.³ Savedoff and Joselow (2010) draw on examples from Mexico, India, South Africa, and Uganda to show how transparency can help to improve health services delivery by increasing accountability and public engagement.⁴ In the United States, the multi-billion dollar losses caused by financial fraud at Enron, WorldCom, and other corporations in 2002 created additional demand from shareholders and citizens for more transparency and accountability in how corporate finances are managed, and how governments oversee and regulate private companies.

Definitions of Transparency

Experts have called transparency a universally accepted value in public administration ethics,⁵ and generally define governmental transparency as the degree to which access to government information is available.⁶ Public sector management expert David Heald suggests that in addition to access to information by recipients (event transparency), transparency also requires administrative processes to be accessible, simple, and comprehensible (process transparency).⁷ He identifies four directions of transparency: upwards (a hierarchical supervisor can observe the conduct or results produced by a subordinate), downwards (subordinates can observe the conduct/results of supervisors), outwards (when those inside an organization can see what is happening outside an organization such as the conduct or results of peer organizations), and inwards (when those outside an organization can see what is going on within).

Transparency International's organizational mission encompasses many of these theoretical dimensions of transparency, including process and event

transparency, multi-directionality, and the need for information to be comprehensible. According to TI, transparency is:

a characteristic of governments, companies, organizations and individuals of being open in the clear disclosure of information, rules, plans, processes, and actions. As a principle, public officials, civil servants, managers and directors of companies and organizations, and board trustees have a duty to act visibly, predictably and understandably to promote participation and accountability.⁸

In this definition transparency is both a characteristic or descriptive adjective and an ethical principle or rule meant to guide the conduct of organizations and individuals. Examining transparency as an ethical principle reveals several aspects of a normative code of conduct. First, it involves access to information which will increase knowledge. In other words, there is something that must be disclosed--either proactively, or when demanded by someone who is entitled to know (even if this ethical “entitlement” does not rise to the level of an enforceable legal right). Secondly, the things to be disclosed include not only information such as facts and figures (event transparency), e.g. performance measures, financial statements, and databases of organizations—but also the mechanisms and processes by which the work is accomplished (process transparency). Both process and outcomes are valued: knowledge about how the decision or work is accomplished is deemed as important as what was actually decided or done.

A third aspect of the code, implied by the mention of participation and accountability, is that access to information is granted to those affected by the decisions, transactions, or work of the organization. This could include a wide range of stakeholders from within and external to the organization: employees, shareholders, suppliers, customers, and citizens. In the model presented in Figure 1, I have referred to these stakeholders as “observers” of transparency. Fourthly, the code specifies the suppliers of the access to knowledge: the *disclosers* of transparency. Specifically, these are public officials, civil services, managers, directors and trustees. By the declaration that the disclosers have a “duty” to act visibly, predictably and understandably vis-à-vis the observers or stakeholders, the code implies that the disclosers are in a fiduciary or trust relationship with the observers. This position of trust obliges the disclosers to perform in certain ways.

Acting “visibly” suggests that the civil servants, managers, and trustees should not be hiding anything that is part of their institutional or fiduciary role (though they may still claim a right to privacy with respect to their personal lives). Acting “predictably” means that certain behavior is expected by people in their role, and that omissions of these acts, or actions beyond this prescribed role, should be explained or accounted for. Finally, acting “understandably” implies that the people affected by the actions can account for the *motivations* and *interests* of the person in the position of trust (the civil servant, manager, or trustee) and can assess or judge how the motivations and interests led to the actions. This aspect of the definition is similar to what Heald calls “embracing simplicity and comprehensibility.”⁹

Transparency as Active Disclosure

Richard Oliver (2004) deconstructs transparency into an observer, something “observed”, and a means to observe.¹⁰ Oliver is very focused on the *activity* of transparency. He notes that the word “transparency” is derived from “trans” meaning movement, and “parent” meaning visible. The implication of transparency, in his view, is *active disclosure* which allows others to see the truth without trying to hide or obscure meaning, or alter facts. Thus, transparency creates a responsibility or obligation on the part of the observed (similar to TI’s concept of “duty”). Other authors also have emphasized this distinction between earlier “passive” definitions of transparency, which suggest that transparency is being imposed by others, and more recent definitions which portray transparency as self-imposed and active: interventions undertaken by the “observed” in order to reduce risk and improve performance.¹¹ Whether transparency is active or passive, the net effect is to shift some power from the observed to the observer.¹²

Advantages to transparency include its links to job satisfaction, lower turn-over of staff, higher inter-personal and institutional trust, opportunities for quality improvement, and less corruption.¹³ Yet, transparency also has costs: enforcing transparency as a code of conduct can be expensive, and organizations worry about loss of power and competitive advantage from disclosure.¹⁴ Transparency policies can have unintended effects, causing officials to use language which is more vague and innocuous as they try to avoid disclosure.¹⁵ In addition, the focus on external transparency can have the perverse effect of reducing trust, especially where experiential and implicit knowledge are crucial to how experts (for example, physicians) do their jobs.¹⁶ Transparency focuses on things that are easily measured but not necessarily the factors which are most important. This may result in “the ‘real’ workings of the institution, its social structure, cultural values, modes of organization” being ignored.¹⁷ For example, increasing visibility of medical errors can focus disproportionate regulatory attention on rare risks and increase defensive reactions.¹⁸ These potential disadvantages and trade-offs of transparency regulation have created interest in studying transparency more closely in organizations.¹⁹

METHODS

Study Design

This formative, exploratory research study used a narrative research design and methods to examine transparency in health organizations. Narrative is “spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically related.”²⁰ Narrative research captures stories or experiences of a single life, or a small number of individuals.²¹ As individuals tell stories, they make sense of and bring meaning to events, interpreting the motives behind actions within their own personal, social and historical context. In analyzing these narratives, researchers describe the story and identify themes which suggest meaning. They may also reorganize or “restory” the participants’ stories

into a more general framework, with an emphasis on sequence and key elements such as scene, plot, timing,²² and important turning points or epiphanies.²³

The study involved open-ended interviews using an interview guide. Questions were designed to focus on concepts that appeared, from a review of the literature on health governance and corruption, to be important to transparency. In particular, I asked informants about governance structures and how decisions were made, who was involved in decisions and the nature of participation, and availability of information inside the organization. I also asked general questions about the advantages and disadvantages of transparency, and whether there were times when transparency worked well or was problematic. I designed the questions to be open-ended so that informants could give general comments or reflections about transparency, and describe their own experiences and stories.

Data Collection

Participants in the study included two managers within an urban U.S. community health center in a low-income neighborhood: “Jane,” a female middle-manager in her early 70s, and “Robert,” a male senior-manager in his 50s (not their real names). Jane had a Master’s degree in Social Work and had worked at the health center for 19 years, while Robert had a Master’s in Public Health and 14 years prior work experience with this organization. Interviews were about 1 hour long and were tape recorded and transcribed. The unit of analysis was the transparency stories.

Analysis

I used narrative analysis to examine the stories told about transparency. Investigating narratives in the workplace can give valuable insights into the nature of organizations, power relationships within them, and the subjective experience of individuals as organizations change.²⁴ According to Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993), the purpose of narrative analysis is to “see how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives.”²⁵ Narrative is not a reflection of a reality so much as it is a construction of order, given meaning in the act of telling.²⁶ Each of the informants I interviewed had told me earlier that they weren’t sure what I would get out of the interview, because they didn’t know what transparency was; they could not define it. Yet, as we talked, they told many stories which they thought showed transparent or non-transparent behavior. They developed their ideas about transparency by telling and interpreting stories from organizational life. Through these stories I hoped to see how the participants “enacted” transparency themselves, or how they described it as being enacted by others.

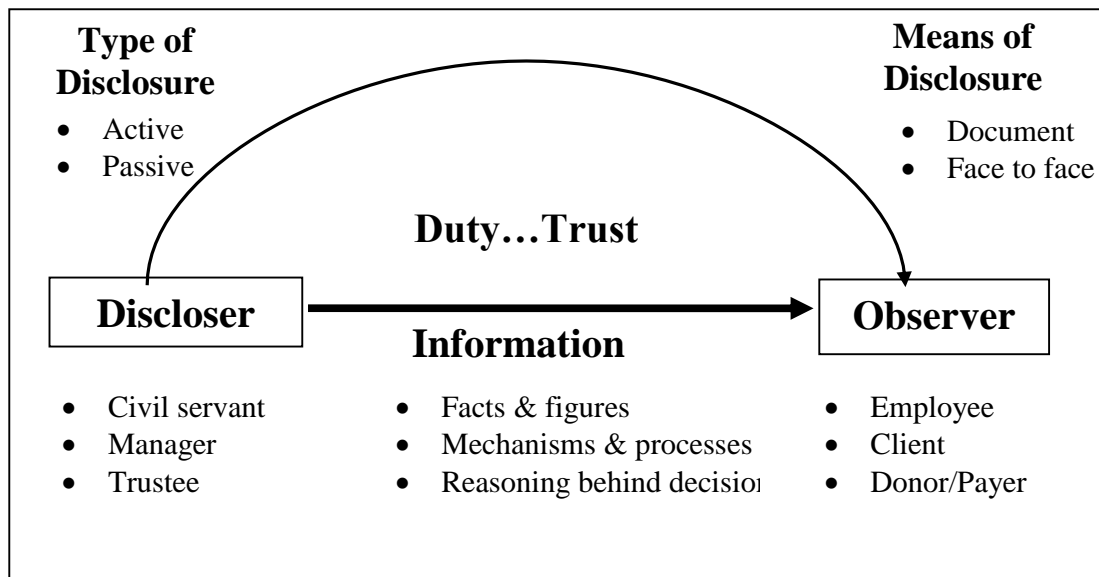
In analyzing the transparency narratives, I examined structure using Kenneth Burke’s dramatisic model of human relations.²⁷ Burke’s five questions, shown below, provided prompts to examine human conduct and relationships around organizational transparency:

Act	What was done?
Scene	When or where as it done?
Agent	Who did it?
Agency	How was it done?
Purpose	Why was it done?

Burke refers to act, scene, agent, agency and purpose as the “dramatistic pentad,” and suggests that calling attention to them helps to impute motives or justifications for human behavior, and to understand attitudes.²⁸

I identified which of these elements of narrative were present, and the relative amount of importance the narrator placed on the different elements. Blending Burke’s dramatistic approach with the elements of the transparency code of conduct shown in Figure 1, I also tried to identify the “discloser” whose duty it is to provide access to information, the “observer” who has the right to know information, and other elements such as the type of disclosure, means of disclosure, and the type of information concerned.

Figure 1: Transparency Code of Conduct



Riessman notes that people often tell narratives where “there has been a breach between ideal and real, self and society.”²⁹ In analyzing the transcripts, I tried to identify such breaches and examine what they may mean within the social construction of transparency. For example, as the theory of transparency suggests, the act of revealing or sharing information may be threatening because it is perceived as ceding organizational power. Looking more closely at narratives of disclosure, I saw evidence that informants were aware of these power issues, and used the narrative to explain and justify their own decisions to disclose in

light of what “ideal transparency” would demand. Previous research in the field of narrative analysis suggests this is a way of regaining a sense of control and establishing order over events.³⁰

As transparency takes place in a social setting of the health care organization, I also examined relationships, especially the narrator’s “social capital,” or the relationship between the narrator and his or her social network in the organization. Social capital—defined as the collective value of all the social networks we know, and the interpersonal trust that arises from them—is an important source of interpersonal trust, cooperation, and communication.³¹ Because transparency involves communication and the flow of information, and because lack of transparency is associated with lack of trust, the informants’ affiliations with others were important in framing their stories. I have examined how these issues are embodied in the language and structures of the stories.

Transcription Conventions

I picked two narratives to examine in depth, one from each informant. For these stories, I used the following transcription conventions:³²

/ = rise in terminal pitch direction or tone

\ = fall in terminal pitch direction or tone

. = each dot indicates a half second pause

____ = emphasis is indicated by underlining

() = words in parentheses indicate informant vocalizations other than words, i.e. sigh, laugh

[] = remarks by transcriber/author

= contiguous utterances, second latched immediately to the first, without overlapping

FINDINGS

The informants told many stories of how they had experienced transparency in their organization: Jane shared nine transparency stories, while Robert told 12 stories. Table 1 summarizes the plots and some key elements of these stories.

Table 1 : Transparency Narratives

No.	Name	Story	Behavior enacted	Role	Outcome/Consequences
<i>Jane's stories</i>					
J-1	A number that's given	CFO gives Jane budgeting facts. He discloses the result of a decision to set targeted number of visits for the department, but not the mechanism or process by which management came to decision.	Transparent	Observer	Negative
J-2	Out of the loop	Jane learns about a staff departure indirectly, from a patient. This is information which she thinks should have been disclosed to her by management.	Non-transparent	Observer	Negative
J-3	The Governor came	Jane learns that the Governor is going to visit her health center. But because she is informed very late, and she is not given an opportunity to discuss the meaning of the visit, Jane is not sure how she should react or behave.	Transparent	Observer	Negative
J-4	I never got word	Jane learns about a new disease treatment initiative after focus groups with patients have already been held. She does not have an opportunity to participate in the research regarding the new initiative, despite the fact that many of the patients in her department have the disease concerned.	Non-transparent	Observer	Negative
J-5	Close to the chest	Jane has to figure out by herself the unspoken criteria for raises for staff members. She learns these criteria indirectly, by observing behavior of the HR director during meetings.	Non-transparent	Observer	Negative
J-6	Error in judgment	Jane discloses poor performance of staffer. She does this because she knows that professionally it is the right thing to do. But the people who receive the disclosed information act in ways that Jane perceives are insensitive, and the staff member refuses to accept the disciplinary action.	Transparent	Discloser	Negative
J-7	Space	Jane worries that senior management wants her physical space, but this issue is not addressed directly. Senior staff	Non-transparent	Observer	Negative

		come by to observe how she is using space, but she is not given a chance to explain or discuss. The uncertainty in the process causes fear.			
J-8	She's very assertive	Jane describes how a reasonable request by a minority staff member is nevertheless refused by senior management. Jane suspects that this decision is motivated by racial distrust of assertive African American women.	?	?	Transparency & racism?
J-9	Required transparent	Insurance companies require certain evaluations to measure client improvement, as part of a pay-for-performance initiative. Jane reports these data to insurance companies; however, she sees the disclosure as being a burden which doesn't help the organization to achieve its mission.	Transparent	Discloser	Negative
<i>Robert's stories</i>					
R-1	No reason not to know	Robert describes how the organization communicates about incidents and policies, giving the example of a patient fall	Transparent	Not in story	Positive
R-2	Not the safest neighborhood	Robert describes how a reported incident of a staff member being accosted in the parking lot was discussed openly. As a result, changes were made (i.e. security guard, more lights) which benefited everyone	Transparent	Not in story	Positive
R-3	Culture of team work	Robert describes how a new policy of government requires patients to be enrolled in insurance programs. Senior management held meetings for people from various departments, to strategize on reaching this goal. This was an example of the culture of team work to resolve problems.	Transparent	Not in story	Positive
R-4	Then people will trust	In this example of transparency, Robert states that the CEO disclosed the financial difficulties of health center to the staff. Sharing this information before the organization is actually in crisis, allows people to trust and prevents panic. Robert explains that "I don't think you gain by hiding things from people, because eventually they find out	Transparent	Not in story	Positive

		that you were hiding something. And that's never good."			
R-5	Appropriately resentful?	Robert questions people's right to know salary data. Your right to know depends on your role in the organization. Do you really need to know something to perform your role, i.e. is it "your business" to know? Some information (like salaries) should not be public.	Non-transparent	Not in story	Positive
R-6	Building a budget	Robert claims that the budget process is pretty open. The CFO communicates with each department manager during the budget process, working "back and forth" with managers on their budgets. (Contrast with narrative J-1)	Transparent	Not in story	Positive
R-7	Space	A department head challenges space costing decision. When the floor space is actually measured, it turns out the department manager was right, and the allocation of space cost is recalculated. (Contrast with narrative J-7)	Transparent	Not in story	Positive
R-8	Balancing the budget	This story tells how the senior management on the Budget Committee work together in a meeting to balance the budget. In addition, a finance committee meets weekly, and department managers are invited to this meeting if the topic is related to their activities and programs. This continuous process develops a budget that is presented to the Board.	Transparent	Not in story	Positive
R-9	<u>That's</u> what you're building?	Robert discloses plans for new building to community members, who don't understand the simple sketches meant for illustration only and get upset. The point of the story is that information disclosed without adequate context can cause misunderstanding and resistance to change.	Transparent	Discloser	Negative
R-10	Better than Mass General	Robert presses senior management to disclose positive quality performance information. This is an ideal story, in that Robert is not actually in the position of discloser, but describes how if he were, he would choose to disclose.	Transparent	Discloser	Positive

R-11	Looking too rich	Robert is pressured by another senior manager to not disclose financial data that may hurt the organization's fundraising ability. Robert chooses to disclose anyway.	Transparent	Discloser	Positive
R-12	We can't help you now	In his prior job, Robert does not disclose important financial information to Board of Directors. When the Board finally does find out, they feel betrayed. It is too late to make changes, and the organization has to fold.	Non-transparent	Discloser	Negative

The narratives exhibited a range of behaviors, both transparent and non-transparent, with positive and negative consequences from each. Table 2 highlights several findings from the narrative analysis that are explained below.

Table 2: Analysis of Transparency Narratives

		Jane	Robert
Position in Hierarchy		Line function. Previously promoted. Staff report to her. Feels respected, but also doubts. Middle management	Staff function. Previous job was higher level. No staff reporting to him. Senior management.
Source of Social capital		Direct reports, people who are not powerful.	Senior managers, partnerships outside the organization
Agent in stories		All 9 stories told from Jane's personal viewpoint.	8 out of 12 stories do not feature Robert.
Role Taken—discloser or observer		In 6 of the 9 stories, Jane is the observer (person with “right to know”). In two stories (J-6 “Error in judgment” and J-9 “Required transparency”) she is the discloser , & transparency is seen as an obligation or imposed. In one story, her role is unclear.	In the last 4 narratives, all of which include Robert as an agent, he is in the position of discloser .
Transparent or non-transparent behavior, and its outcome		Stories enact mostly non-transparent behavior. Two stories enact transparent behavior that is unhelpful or has a negative outcome.	Stories enact mostly transparent behavior (3 out of 4 where Robert is agent). One negative outcome comes from disclosure (R-9 “That’s what you’re building”) and one negative comes from non-disclosure (R-12 “We can’t help you now”)
Focus of Narratives (Burke's framework)		Agency ----- How Means or process by which information is disclosed, or not disclosed.	Purpose ----- Why Purpose of disclosure or decision not to disclose.

Position in Hierarchy

While both informants held the title of “Director,” their positions in the hierarchy of the organization were not the same. Robert considered himself a senior manager, although some traditional aspects of power such as line management function, progressive career trajectory, number of directly reporting staff, were lacking. Robert’s position as Director of Development situates him in a staff function, and he admitted that unlike the other managers, he did not have any staff who reported to him. Robert also started as the Chief Financial Officer then “shifted over” to his current role as Director of Planning and Development, a change which could be perceived as a demotion. In contrast, Jane started at the health center as a social worker and was later promoted to Director of a clinical service, a line management position. She also mentions having several responsibilities related to personnel management (e.g. supervising staff clinically for quality of care, hiring staff).

Yet, for both informants the most critical element which identifies their position in the organizational hierarchy is membership on the “senior management team.” Jane is not a member, although she had asked several times to join (“I’ve asked for years that what they call ‘ancillary services’ should be included in the administrative body”), whereas Robert is on the senior management team (“There’s a senior management team which is relatively small, there’s probably six or seven of us that are considered senior management...”). In this critical sense, then, Jane is a lower level manager than Robert. This measure of organizational power and position turned out to be important to the informants’ understanding of transparency. Jane’s narratives are almost all about the lack of transparency in the organization, from the viewpoint of observer, and the negative consequences of transparency even when Jane herself is the discloser. Jane’s key complaint with regard to the transparency in the organization is that she does not have enough understanding of the mechanisms and processes by which decisions were made. Her negative view of transparency in the organization may be related to her perception that, despite her role as a line manager with many staff reporting to her, she had not been invited to participate in senior management decisions, and thus does not have this insider’s view of or stake in organizational decision-making.

Robert’s narratives, on the other hand, paint a picture of a highly transparent organization, with a culture of team work and participation (see Table 1, narratives R-1 through R-4, R-6, and R-8). For Robert, the consequences of transparency are mostly positive, and the organization has adopted an active disclosure approach to transparency. As a member of senior management, Robert’s stories are mostly from the viewpoint of discloser.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the “soft authority” of networks, norms, and trust facilitating actions.³³ The transparency code of conduct, described earlier and illustrated in Figure 1, highlights the trust relationship between the discloser and the observer. Applying this theoretical model to organizational life, we can see that the informant’s position in the hierarchy helps to define his or her “duty” for

transparency in relation to relevant stakeholders. Informants' narratives give some clues about perceived duties toward others, and their feelings of trust or obligation. For example, throughout Jane's narratives, she affiliates herself closely with the staff who report directly to her. Several of her stories show that she is supportive and feels close to her staff, especially people who are not powerful in the organization. In one story (J-6 "Error in judgment"), Jane describes how one of her staff had done something that put the person in opposition to a senior staff member. When the staff member refused to sign a key document, Jane seemed pleased with the staff member's defiance of authority: after Jane finished recounting the story, she added softly "That's fine with me." In another story, Jane's staff member alienates a senior director and Jane defends the staff member, suggesting that the senior director is acting with racial bias (J-8 "She's very assertive").

On the other hand, the stories of Jane's own interactions with senior staff are conspicuously lacking in evidence of social capital. Comments like "I hardly ever see a boss" or "The CEO is very uninvolved," show that she feels isolated from the senior management. Jane calls a mid-level manager's meeting "a charade," then goes on to show how she gets information from her staff, not from peers or from above. For example, Jane learns from her own staff that the Governor is coming to visit her health center (J-3 "The Governor came"):

I found out about it on Monday morning. He came at 2:15 and I found out about it on Monday morning. They didn't know about it much further...but they didn't tell me I should notify staff. They just said he was going to be there at 2:15. And my Domestic Violence coordinator, who lives next door to the Governor, told me and told me to go. So my staff person...told me to go. And I did go. So, I guess, that's another example of information not being shared. I think that's very much an issue. Even it's just informing people. Isn't that a part of transparency? Information. Communication. And you know, I...I wish you were interviewing someone else at my level to see if it's just that I'm blind or I'm excluded. But I don't think so. Because I think that people by and large have a lot of respect for me there.

Jane's affiliation with her staff intensifies her dissatisfaction with the level of transparency in the organization. Jane cannot fully discharge her duty towards her staff—to be transparent towards them by communicating information—if she herself does not receive information in a timely way from her superiors. This helps explain why most of her stories were from the viewpoint of observer, rather than discloser. In a similar way, Jane's affiliation with staff and patients colors her perceptions of the consequences of transparency. The few stories she tells from the viewpoint of discloser (J-6 "Error in judgment," and J-9 "Required transparency") have negative outcomes because she cannot see how the patients or staff--the people to whom she has a "duty"-- are benefiting.

Unlike Jane, Robert seems to affiliate more with senior management, the Board of Directors, and with other partner organizations working with the health center on specific programs. He starts the interview with a long monologue recounting all the different services the center offers, and describing its history. He emphasizes the health center's identity as a federally qualified community

health center with a consumer Board of Directors, and tells eight stories of ideal or hypothetical events showing transparency from the viewpoint of “senior management” rather than personal stories of his own experiences (see Table 1). From these two interviews, it seems clear that people’s experiences of transparency, and the meaning they give to this concept, are likely to be influenced by their position in the organizational hierarchy, and their affiliations or social capital within the organization.

Narrative Structure

Turning to the structure of the transparency narratives themselves, Jane is present in all the stories she tells, acting as the observer in six stories and the discloser in two stories.³⁴ This contrasts with Robert, who is present in only four out of the 12 stories he tells. The other stories—ones where Robert is not involved—are told from the viewpoint of the “senior management team” or a particular member of the senior management team (e.g. the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) or Chief Financial Officer (CFO)). Where he is present in a story, Robert’s role is always the discloser.

Considering only the narratives where the informant was actually in the story, and examining key elements of the structure, I divided narratives into types. The key structural elements I considered were:

- 1) Was the behavior being described transparent, or non-transparent?
- 2) Where is the informant in the narrative? Observer or discloser?
- 3) How did the informant perceive the outcome of the story? Was the transparency behavior seen as having positive or negative consequences?

Overall, there were three types of stories, as shown in Table 3: Dissatisfied Observer, Reluctant Discloser, and Moral Dilemma Disclosure.

Table 3: Transparency Narrative Types

Story Type	Behavior Enacted	Viewpoint	Outcome	Examples*
Dissatisfied observer story	Transparent (but not the right amount, or not timely)	Observer	Negative	J-1, J-3
	Non-transparent	Observer	Negative	J-2, J-4, J-5, J-7
Reluctant discloser story	Transparent (disclosure is obligatory, but may not benefit the organization)	Discloser	Negative	J-6, J-9, R-9
Moral dilemma disclosure story	Transparent	Discloser	Positive	R-10, R-11
	Non-transparent	Discloser	Negative	R-12

*codes for examples refer to numbering of stories in Table 1. Stories J-1 and R-12 are analyzed in more detail in the text.

Different types of stories may help us see different aspects of transparency, and the perceived benefits and drawbacks. Below I describe the types of stories briefly. Later, I analyze two stories in detail, including one story by Jane (J-1 “A

number that's given," a Dissatisfied Observer story) and one by Robert (R-12 "We can't help you now," a Moral Dilemma Disclosure story).

Dissatisfied Observer stories

Dissatisfied Observer stories recount experiences of non-transparency, where information was not disclosed which the observer felt she had the right to know, or stories of inadequate transparency, i.e. situations where information was disclosed but it was not enough, or not disclosed in a timely way. For example, Jane receives from the CEO a target number of visits, a number which she needs to use for planning and budgeting. Although this could be considered transparent communication of a fact or figure, Jane is not happy. She complains that the transparency is not adequate because she was not given a chance to participate in discussions about the number. In another narrative, Jane's "Out of the Loop" story (J-2), she tells of how she did not receive information from management about the departure of a long-time staff member. Jane was later embarrassed to learn about this transition from one of her patients.

It is somewhat surprising that Jane did not tell any transparency stories about receiving information with positive consequences. This is possibly because the negative experiences are more salient, and I did not probe for positive experiences she may have had as an observer in enacting transparency.

Reluctant Discloser Stories

Jane also told stories where she was in the role of discloser where the result of the disclosure was not positive. For example, in one case (J-9 "Required transparency"), Jane is required by insurance companies to provide data on staff performance. This is seen as a paper-pushing exercise without benefit to herself or her staff. She doubts whether it is really in the patients' interests either. One story told by Robert also fits in this category (R-9 "That's what you're building?"). Robert recounts how at a community meeting he drew a sketch of a new building that the health center was intending to construct. The sketch was only meant to provide the idea of how the building would look, but the community members took the sketch literally, and complained loudly about the plans for the new building. This appeared to Robert to be a cautionary tale about sharing information without providing context or background for the recipient of the information. He noted that in working with their Board of Directors it was often necessary to educate one or two members of the Board ahead of time, so that when information was presented to the Board it could be defended by Board members (the observers briefed beforehand) and not just by senior management (the disclosers).

Moral Dilemma Disclosure Stories

Another type of disclosure story is one where the informant reports having struggled with the decision of whether to disclose or not. These stories can present transparent situations (i.e. the struggle ended with a disclosure) or may end in a non-transparent situation, where the decision is not to disclose. For

example Robert describes how he was pressured by another manager to not disclose the organization's positive financial position in the annual report (R-11, "Looking too rich"). The worry was that people would think that the organization did not need assistance, and this disclosure would hurt future fundraising. Robert describes how he rejected this argument and decided to disclose the information anyway: "But this is our annual report, they're gonna see it. They're gonna see the audited report. This is what it is, you know. So we publish that."

Burke's Structural Analysis

Finally, I analyzed two narratives in detail by applying Burke's structural framework to examine the narrative as a drama or persuasive tale, looking at act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. Jane's narrative (J-1, "That's a number that's given") is presented and analyzed first, followed by Robert's narrative (R-12, "We can't help you now").

"That's a number that's given" transparency narrative (J-1)

Interviewer. *One principle of governance is transparency. If you were talking about [your organization], would you use the word 'transparency' to describe it?*

J. *...(clears throat) Well, how I understand transparency is how clear it is where decisions are made and how they are made\..Yes. Not necessarily that I would be involved, but at least I would know how..these decisions are made\.*

Interviewer. *So, would you describe [your organization] as transparent using that definition that you just described?*

J. *Not at all. Because I..because I see that all of the decisions are made and then they are sort of passed down.*

Interviewer. *Can you give an example?*

J. *Well. Like the number of visits that are required from each department\.. How many visits you need..a year to... for your budget numbers. That's a number that's given. It's not even something that, you know... The CFO will say to me. 'Well, it was 12,000 visits last year I'm going to raise it to 13,000.' It's not a, it's not a participatory...so I guess when I think about transparency I also think about participatory actions/ and I don't ..I don't see that at all at [my organization]\. I see it as, there's policy set and it's..passed down.*

Interviewer. *Can you tell me a little bit more about the budgeting process? That...the CFO works with you and tells you=*

J. *=But I wouldn't say he works with me, at all! I mean. I have a staff and they have salaries\.. And so that's a given in the budget\.. But how much we spend on*

travel or seminars or...that's just...it's just there, it's just given.....And I hardly know. I just spend when I need to and it's not a... I've always thought it would be very handy to be able to say I've got this much for conferences. And so my staff.. we would divide it up and people could, and then I could encourage staff. But this way, I don't encourage staff 'cause I really don't even know what it is. So staff comes and they say that they want to go to a conference, and I say fine. (laugh) But it's not part of a plan, it feels unplanned.

Applying Burke's model, I have identified the components enacted in Jane's transparency narrative.

- **Act (What):** The decision on budget guidelines such as the number of visits per department and the budget for conferences.
- **Scene (When/where):** Annual budget process.
- **Agent (Who):** CFO
- **Agency (How):** Policy is set and passed down. The informant spends a lot of time explaining how the disclosure was not transparent nor was the process participatory. This is the focus of the narrative.
- **Purpose (Why):** In this narrative, the purpose for the non-transparent behavior is not clear. The informant doesn't talk about why the agent did not disclose fully the information she wanted to know.

We can see from this story that the CFO disclosed to Jane some information that was relevant and timely about the number of visits to be used in the budget process. This information was a *fact*. The information disclosed was decided at a higher level. But the disclosure did not involve information on the *mechanisms* or *processes* by which the decision was made, which made Jane feel unhappy. She felt the decision was non-transparent and thought that she should have been part of the decision-making process. A second piece of budget information, the size of budget available for conferences, was not disclosed at all. The consequence of this non-disclosure was that Jane felt that her own decisions were unplanned and she was unable to use conference attendance as a means to motivate her staff.

“We can't help you now” transparency narrative (R-12)

R. I was in a struggling theatre company, my last theatre job. We really were in desperate straights. We were in desp—we had no cash. We were very low cash. We owed tons of money. And I was doing my best to sugar coat it for the board. Till it got to the point where we just, we were not..we were not, uh, we couldn't function. We weren't going to be able to meet the next payroll. And I went to the Board for help, and they said (panting sound, like someone in panic) ‘We can't help you now!’ (laughs) You know, and it's not like they hadn't been dealing with it on some level. But I was much younger in those days, and now in hindsight I wish I had been older. I just didn't believe that, that I could tell them, you know, how bad things were. And we ended up having to close the theatre. And we might have had to close it anyway, but it didn't go down well. And I think that..we had been struggling for a year, and I thought that we had made some, from my perspective we had made some great strides\ . I thought that by

actually breaking even, which still left us in a huge hole, we had really made some great strides, and that we were going to be, if not ok, at least, you know, I thought that we were feeling good about moving forward. But we couldn't get to the next step. And they didn't see it as good at all. They thought, you know, 'we didn't realize how much trouble we were in'. And I take, I have to take the blame for that, you know, I didn't reveal it. I tried to, to mask it as much as possible, and that was..and it didn't help. And I don't know if..that has shaded what I feel these days/, or not. But, it certainly was not good. And we, and so I, it's just much better to let people know what's going on.

Interviewer. *You mentioned that you thought that it was related to your age?*

R. *(pause) I don't know if it really does. But I was much younger then. And I, and I think that now, maybe with some maturity, I sort of feel, 'so what are they going to do to me?' (chuckles) I felt, uh, much younger...and responsible. And, you know, I'll be punished.*

Interviewer. *Was there anything different about that organization, the structures that were set up, that made it possible?*

R. *No... I mean it was a small organization, it didn't have the resources that we have here, saved up. Other than that, it was the same idea, it was a Board of Directors, it was a non-profit board. I was in charge. I was the senior staff person/. And it was my responsibility to keep them informed...um...And...and I didn't.*

Applying the dramatisitic framework, the components are identified:

- **Act (What):** CFO decided not to share important information with Board of Directors about financial problems.
- **Scene (When/where):** A struggling theatre company in 1980s.
- **Agent (Who)** Robert, in the role of the CFO. "I was in charge." "It was my responsibility..."
- **Agency (How):** "Sugar coat" the situation. Don't disclose. Mask it as much as possible.
- **Purpose (Why):** Young and immature. Afraid to tell. Felt responsible and feared being punished if the Board of Directors was confronted with bad news.

In this story, Robert is the CFO who does not disclose relevant information in a timely way. His organization has very little cash and massive debt, yet he does not share this information clearly and directly with board members who have a right to know. The story reveals that the information was actively hidden from the board for reasons involving immaturity, optimistic (some would say wishful) thinking about the future, and fear of what would happen when information was disclosed. Although it is not clear that early disclosure would have saved the

organization, the consequences of the lack of transparency were dire for the organization, and seemed life changing for Robert.

Burke's dramatisitic framework suggests that narrative stories may be structurally different. Indeed, in comparing these two stories we find that Jane's dissatisfied observer story focuses more on agency, or *how* the information was transmitted, whereas Robert's moral dilemma disclosure story focused on the purpose of disclosure (the "*Why*" question). Both stories involve the non-disclosure of information by a CFO, but the purpose and mode of non-disclosure are significantly different. The understanding of purpose is greater in the story where the informant is in the position of the discloser, as opposed to the story told from the viewpoint of the recipient of information.

DISCUSSION

In these stories, position in the organizational hierarchy and affiliations or social networks do seem to affect people's experiences of transparency. Jane, as a middle manager who is closely tied to her direct reporting staff, tells stories mostly from the viewpoint of an observer. Even stories which depict disclosure of information are sometimes seen to have negative outcomes—either because the transparency is incomplete, not timely, or because the transparency is "required" or imposed. Robert, a senior manager, told stories mostly from the viewpoint of the discloser. The heterogeneity in these experiences suggests that creating a "culture of transparency" in organizations, based on common values and understanding, is no easy task.

Robert often told idealized stories of the "good organization," stories in which he was not present. Although these types of narratives are revealing, offering a view into the espoused culture of the organization, it is important to probe further in order to get to personal experiences. This may be especially relevant in trying to understand the experiences of senior management, trustees, and others who are seen as having a "duty" to be transparent. There may be a social desirability bias which inclines people in this position to only tell stories which portray them as fulfilling their duty, disclosing information with happy results.

Stories which are most salient may not be ones where a person is an observer of full transparency. In this study no one told stories of being the observer where the transparency had a positive outcome. This may be understandable in the sense that if transparency is seen as one's right, it is hardly noteworthy when that right is respected. Much more noticeable are the stories of transparency unfulfilled (dissatisfied observer), and the moral dilemma situations where the discloser ponders whether or not to release information. Narrative analysis may be more easily applied to elucidate these types of situations.

This study provides several lessons for future research on this topic. First, without specific prompts it is possible that an informant will not see or "enact" transparency from the viewpoints of both the receiver and the discloser of information. With prompting, informants might remember experiences from "both sides," but the preference for one role versus the other is in itself an

interesting statement about the way transparency is understood, and how it may relate to organizational roles and perceptions of trust and obligation.

Secondly, higher level employees are more likely to see their role as that of discloser and may feel pressure to narrate stories of transparency that show themselves in a positive light. To get beyond the rhetoric of what transparency should look like, the researcher might ask informants to tell stories which are more personal, and encourage comparisons with how the employee acted in previous jobs settings.

Thirdly, research questions which explore the positive and negative consequences of transparency are important. Questions can be framed in such a way that informants have an opportunity to tell stories of transparent behavior with good and bad consequences, as well as non-transparent behavior which was justified (by the outcomes) or not justified. Again without explicit prompts people may tend to favor one type of story, even if they have had a range of experiences.

Burke's dramaturgic framework seems to work well for transparency research. Researchers adopting this framework should use an interview guide which includes prompts to elicit details on the components of the narrative, as well as consequences of transparent or non-transparent behavior. See Annex 1 for suggested questions.

This study has limitations. For example, the interviews did not deeply explore the value systems of participants or their personal histories. Additional contextual information might provide different insights and could be helpful in interpreting narratives. A possible limitation of this kind of research in other settings is that it may be difficult to find informants who are introspective and willing to spend the time needed to explore transparency narratives fully.

CONCLUSION

Much research on transparency in global settings has focused on institutional design for access to information, such as Freedom of Information legislation and related reforms, and implementation of information regimes and strategies such as online performance reports, e-government, and external budget transparency.³⁵ Yet, these avenues of research do not help to illuminate how change develops in an organization and the micro organizational social processes which influence policy implementation.³⁶ Eliciting narratives of transparency in health care organizations can be a tool to gain insight into how to develop and nurture organizational cultures which are favorable to transparency, adapted to particular social, economic, and country contexts. The analysis of this small set of stories suggests potential areas where people may understand transparency differently depending on organizational position and prior experience.

Perceptions of transparency gathered through narrative research could also be helpful in evaluating regulations meant to increase transparency. For example, "Dissatisfied Observer" stories may suggest incomplete transparency, i.e. areas where information disclosed is not fully comprehensible to the recipient, or where disclosure focuses too much on facts and not enough on process. "Reluctant Discloser" stories may reveal perceived costs to transparency which policy makers have not anticipated or fully understood. These may present

barriers to disclosure which could be overcome through targeted interventions or refinement in transparency policies. “Moral Dilemma Disclosure” stories may help inform the design of culturally appropriate whistleblower policies and strategies, revealing how individuals grapple with moral choices within their social networks and the context of their position and organizational setting.

Promotion of a transparency culture in the health sector of specific countries requires understanding of how people construct the meaning of transparency. The conceptual model and methods presented in this study provide a way to study transparency in health care institutions. Narrative analysis focused on stories of transparent and non-transparent behavior can help researchers gain insight into human conduct and relationships which affect organizational accountability. These insights can, in turn, help in the design of interventions which cultivate a transparency culture and promote good governance.

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³⁴ In one story (J-8 "She's very assertive"), which seems to be making a point about transparency and bias or racism, Jane conveys a request by a staff member. The transparency roles in this story are not clear.

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Annex 1: Proposed Interview Guide for Transparency Narrative Research

1. Would you use the word “transparent” to describe your organization? Why/Why not?
2. Tell me about how decisions are made in your organization.
 - related to planning and budgeting
 - related to personnel (hiring, raises, promotions, disciplining)
3. Tell me about a time when information was disclosed to you in a way that you thought was transparent. (Elicits positive personal receiver stories)*
4. Do you feel that you have a right to know some information in the organization, which you are currently not receiving? (Elicits personal non-transparent receiver stories)*
5. Were you ever “tested” in terms of having to make a decision or choice to disclose or not disclose information? (Elicits narratives of moral dilemma disclosure)*
6. Tell me about a time you were proud of your own efforts to be transparent. (Elicits positive personal disclosure stories)*
7. Some people say that transparency can cause dissent or conflict, or has other negative effects. Do you think this might be true in your organization?

**Probes of stories* (for Act, Scene, Agent, Agency, Purpose, consequences)

- When did this happen? Where?
- Who did you think should have that information? Who do you think should give (or have given) that information?
- What role did you play?
- Why did you want to (have access to that information) (share that information)?
- How did you learn about.....? How did you share information...?