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**Counter-narratives as analytical strategies: Methodological implications**

Monika Müller and Sanne Frandsen

Abstract

When faced with a multitude of research participants’ voices, perceptions, and interpretations in qualitative fieldwork, researchers often resort to what we call ‘common sense coding’ to analyze the empirical material, i.e. using commonsensical reasoning based on the Aristotle’s traditional laws of thought (laws of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle). While analyzing data with this kind of reasoning can be very useful and provide convincing research outputs, it might at the same time limit the insights we as researchers can draw from the material. We thus argue to not neglect but instead emphasize ‘counter-narratives’ as alternative analytical strategies – in the form of untold stories and deconstruction, multiplicity and ambiguity, and tensions and paradoxes – to complement common sense coding. We unfold the theoretical and methodological implications of a counter-narrative lens and illustrate how it may enable us to analyze empirical data in more nuanced ways.

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# Introduction

Focusing on a quite rough football game in 1951 between two Ivy League universities, Dartmouth College and Princeton University, Hastorf and Cantril ([1954](#_ENREF_32)) show how one and the same game was interpreted in totally different ways by audiences tied to these universities. In a questionnaire for students of both universities, the authors of the paper found diverging accounts of what had happened in this complex social event. Of the potentially available matrix of events during the game, some incidents were reactivated by an individual as being significant (through connecting them to past experiences), whereas other incidents were not reactivated and thus had gone unnoticed. The authors conclude: “It seems clear that the ‘game’ actually was many different games and that each version of the events that transpired was just as ‘real’ to a particular person as other versions were to other people” ([Hastorf & Cantril, 1954, p. 132](#_ENREF_32)).

This study centering on the football game provides a great example of conflicting interpretations of events and situations that researchers often encounter in qualitative research. While it might be difficult to establish ‘what really happened’ ([Tracy, 2013, p. 40](#_ENREF_49)), we as researchers in organization studies are nonetheless (just like Hastorf and Cantril were) faced with a variety of different narratives that arise around organizational events ([Buchanan & Dawson, 2007](#_ENREF_9); [Collins & Rainwater, 2005](#_ENREF_11)). Narratives, according to Vaara, Sonenshein and Boje ([2016](#_ENREF_50)), are temporal and discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, collective, and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving. When we analyze these narratives and accounts of organizational events, however, we face critical questions: which accounts, standpoints, and voices can or should we include, and how can we include them to create a research contribution in a truthful and trustworthy way? Frandsen, Lundholt and Kuhn ([2016](#_ENREF_21)) argue for a counter-narrative lens to study organizations, as it enables us to see struggles over meaning, values, and identities in the “complexity and controversy” in organizational life (p. 8). In this chapter, we unfold the theoretical and methodological implications of a counter-narrative lens and illustrate how it may enable us to analyze empirical data in more nuanced ways. To do so, we first review common approaches to qualitative inquiry – typically based on traditional ‘laws of thought’ – and their limitations to then explain how and why a counter-narrative lens can be a useful addition or alternative.

The most prevalent definition of counter-narratives is based on Bamberg and Andrews ([2004](#_ENREF_5)), who write that “[c]ounter-narratives only make sense in relation to something else, that which they are countering. The very name identifies it as an oppositional category, in tension with another category” (p. x). Establishing this dual positioning, nonetheless, is complicated: “what is dominant and what is resistant are not, of course static questions, but rather are forever shifting placements” ([Bamberg & Andrews, 2004, p. x](#_ENREF_5)). Based on this definition, we as qualitative researchers might find it hard to take these shifting placements into account while trying to include polyphonic voices of people in different organizational roles and their varying interpretations of their social reality. When it comes to social, and more specifically organizational, research, we often find a variety of accounts and interpretations of specific events or people in particular organizations. While some of these accounts appear to confirm one another and start to form a narrative, other statements can be a bit more ‘off’: either opposing the emerging narrative, or overlapping with it while pointing to a different interpretation, or being on the sidelines of the more dominant emerging narrative.

When analyzing this empirical material, various narratives or fragments of narratives emerge on two levels: first, in the form of diverse accounts or stories[[1]](#footnote-1) of our respondents including conflicting or contradictory statements about certain events or situations (in interviews, informal conversations, etc.), and second, in the form of our theorization of the findings when we bring together different accounts and statements of our respondents to create convincing research outputs ([Czarniawska, 2004](#_ENREF_13); [Rhodes & Brown, 2005](#_ENREF_43)).

While we are analyzing and constructing narratives on these two levels, nevertheless, we often resort to ways of reasoning or sensemaking ([Weick, 1995](#_ENREF_51)) that follow the influential classic laws of thought (the laws of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle, formulated by ancient Greek philosophers), which have become the basis of common sense in our Western world. In our everyday live situations, these traditional laws of thought tell us that one thing cannot be another thing at the same time, that contradictions mean that one part is true while the other is false, and that there is no ‘middle’ ground in a contradiction. While common sense reasoning can be important and practical in everyday life situations, it becomes highly problematic when trying to evaluate conflicting or contradictory accounts of complex social situations. Commonsensical reasoning in qualitative research – which we refer to as ‘common sense coding’ – might limit the possibilities to analyze social situations involving various actors, interests, viewpoints, perceptions, and experiences, as the laws of logic do not easily apply. For example, the management can both be helping and exploiting employees at the same time; employees can both be motivated and de-motivated at the same time. In this chapter we therefore argue for counter-narratives as alternative analytical strategies on both levels of narratives.

# A brief review: The laws of thought and common sense

Typically, in our Western tradition of reasoning, the ways in which we perceive the material and social world around us are guided by the traditional laws of thought ([Berto, 2007](#_ENREF_6)), famously formulated by Aristotle ([2013](#_ENREF_3)) in his ‘Metaphysics’ (Book IV or Gamma). The three axiomatic rules of thought, which we often connect to ‘common sense’, are – in a simplified version – the following:

1. the *law of identity*: A=A, and cannot be B, which basically means that one thing cannot be another thing at the same time,
2. the *law of non-contradiction*: something cannot be and not be in the same sense and at the same time, and
3. the *law of the excluded middle*: in a contradiction consisting of an affirmation and negation of the same statement, one statement is true and the other must be false, but there is no third or ‘middle’ possibility.

With regard to the second law, the law of non-contradiction, Aristotle ([2013](#_ENREF_3)) writes that this “most firm of all first principles” means that ontologically it is not possible for something to be and not be simultaneously: “For the same thing to be present and not be present at the same time in the same subject, and according to the same, is impossible” (p. 69). He continues that it would be folly of the inquirer to believe that something can be and simultaneously not be: “But […] if an opinion contrary to an opinion be that of contradiction, it is evident that it is impossible for the same inquirer to suppose that at the same time the same thing should be and not be; for one labouring under deception in regard of this would entertain contrary opinions at the same time” (p. 69). At this point, Aristotle also criticizes the view of Heraclitan philosophy of becoming (instead of being), as the ever-changing nature of becoming would not hold true for the law of non-contradiction. In several instances throughout the text, Aristotle criticizes Heraclitus’ view that things can be ‘true’ and ‘not true’ at the same time.

What might complicate the laws of thought, though, (and what Aristotle also mentions) is that there might be different meanings of one word or statement (i.e. different definitions) and changing meanings at different times (before, now, after – which are more explicit in Heraclitus’ philosophy of becoming). Aristotle’s ([2013](#_ENREF_3)) response to these problems is to provide precise definitions that do not include a multitude of other possibilities or meanings (in this regard, he distinguishes between essential and accidental properties of a thing) and to relate to things as they are instead of what they had been or will be at another time. These shifting meanings and temporal changes, nevertheless, might be worth considering, especially when it comes to complex social interactions. Moreover, Aristotle ([2013](#_ENREF_3)) also refutes Protagoras’ view that things can be true and not true at the same time when it comes to humans and their perceptions, social judgements and evaluations, ideas etc.

According to Berto ([2007](#_ENREF_6)), the three laws of thought (identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle) became the most authoritative principles in the history of Western thought. Although Aristotle, in contrast to Protagoras, did not necessarily refer to human perceptions and social situations, the laws of thought nonetheless appear to be a basis for many people to evaluate natural and social phenomena alike with what we often call ‘common sense’. The Cambridge Dictionary describes ‘common sense’ – a term also coined by Aristotle ([2015](#_ENREF_4)) to refer to perceptions via the common senses – in its more contemporary form as “the basic level of practical knowledge and judgment that we all need to help us live in a reasonable and safe way”[[2]](#footnote-2). In this everyday life logic of common sense, most people would probably agree that things or situations are either one way or another – but not both ways at the same time (e.g. either you are ill or not, either you want x or not, etc.). This assessment typically helps people to make sense of statements and situations. In organizational research, Weick ([2010](#_ENREF_52)) describes sensemaking, which is often similar to common sense reasoning, as ongoing cognitive and retrospective construction of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing (p. 83).

Making sense of other people’s sensemaking of situations, events, and the people entangled in them, is also what qualitative researchers need to accomplish once they return from ‘messy’ fieldwork. To be able to analyze and theorize their insights, qualitative researchers need to narrate their results, as Czarniawska ([2004](#_ENREF_13)) points out: writing up and theorizing research findings “assumes the form of showing ‘how come?’ where laws of nature, human intentions and random events form a hybrid mixture” (p. 123). Researchers, thus, construct sense in form of ‘narrative sensemaking’ ([Rhodes & Brown, 2005](#_ENREF_43)), through finding out how things are connected and providing “a structure that makes sense of the events” ([Czarniawska, 2004, p. 23](#_ENREF_13)). This narrative then should be trustworthy, convincing (for readers and reviewers), not too long but to the point (relative to the value of the contributions), and follow a rather strict structure of writing (in a formulaic form – see Czarniawska, 2004, p. 124).

# A critique: Common sense coding as analytical strategy

When it comes to the social sphere and human beings, the laws of thought and common sense are of limited value as the epistemological basis for analyzing narratives. Through ‘coding’, i.e. ascribing a specific fixed meaning we consider to be ‘true’, to an interview statement and/or establishing patterns between emerging categories based on these fixed meanings, we might produce a rigorous research narrative but simultaneously limit the potential for discoveries of alternative and valuable insights. Our own experiences, but also those of colleagues, have shown that qualitative fieldwork often provides material that can be interpreted and theorized in many different ways which might not necessarily follow the laws of logic and, accordingly, common sense. However, in many accounts of how to analyze empirical material, we find hints that point to commonsensical reasoning, or ‘common sense coding’, in reducing the material as a way to be ‘rigorous’. In this section, we provide some examples of these hints in influential descriptions of how to analyze empirical material.

In many cases, Eisenhardt, Graebner, and Sonenshein ([2016](#_ENREF_16)) write, qualitative research aims to generate theory from data in an inductive grounded-theory approach proposed by Glaser and Strauss ([1967](#_ENREF_28)). Grounded theory, according to Charmaz ([2014](#_ENREF_10)), contains (post-)positivist and interpretivist elements, as “it relies on empirical observations and depends on the researcher’s constructions of them” (p. 321). In a (post-)positivist perspective, Tracy ([2013](#_ENREF_49)) writes, qualitative methods aim toward providing a clear answer to the question of ‘what is *really* happening’ to account for reliability and formal generalizability.

The main processes of such inductive approaches, according to Eisenhardt et al. ([2016](#_ENREF_16)), are the following: building thick descriptions from empirical data, coding raw data into first-order themes, raising them to a more abstract level in the form of second-order themes, using constant comparison between emergent theory and data, and engaging with literature to sharpen both the constructs and the theoretical logic of the relationships between constructs (p. 1114). While there is not much detail about how exactly researchers engage in coding and thus develop the narrative of the argument, we find some influential guidelines in Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton ([2012](#_ENREF_27)) or Charmaz ([2014](#_ENREF_10)) ([see also other examples in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018](#_ENREF_42)). We briefly introduce these ideas and point to ways in which the logic of ‘common sense’, based on the laws of thought, come into play.

When it comes to analyzing empirical material, Gioia et al. ([2012](#_ENREF_27)) and Charmaz (2014) refer to two phases of coding: first-order or initial coding and second-order or focused coding. Gioia et al. (2012) mention that a first-order analysis is about capturing themes or ‘categories’ around informant terms which might result in about 50 to 100 categories. The second-order analysis – similar to the notion of axial coding in Glaser and Strauss ([1967](#_ENREF_28)) – is then about asking whether the emerging themes suggest concepts that help describe and explain the observed phenomena ([Gioia et al., 2012](#_ENREF_27)). Gioia et al. (2012) suggest “seeking similarities and differences among the many categories” (p. 20) to eventually reduce the germane categories to a more manageable number (25 to 30) to answer the question ‘What is going on here?’. However, while reducing the categories according to ‘similarities and differences’ (typically based on the law of identity), researchers need to decide about what a statement means and what it does not mean (based on the laws of non-contradiction and excluded middle), thereby excluding other potential overlapping or even contradictory meanings. Faced with the requirement to provide a convincing story within a tight word-content-ratio, researchers thus might use commonsensical reasoning and silence those voices (or codes) within their material that provide different or conflicting accounts of ‘what is going on here’.

Both Gioia et al. ([2012](#_ENREF_27)) and Charmaz ([2014](#_ENREF_10)) emphasize the active construction of codes, as in the second-order analysis it is the researchers that name concepts and connect them in meaningful ways. While initial coding, according to Charmaz ([2014](#_ENREF_10)), entails that researchers remain open to many possible meanings and theoretical directions, focused coding means that the researcher “uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data” (p. 113) and to “pinpoint and develop the most salient codes” (p. 114). However, this advice to use the most significant, frequent, or salient codes to develop a convincing argument often results in common sense coding through establishing which accounts are ‘true’ and ‘not true’ and excluding ambiguity (as a third option or ‘middle’). This way of coding thus might lead to leaving out other, less ‘significant’ or frequent themes. Although we do not question these guidelines for constructing a convincing analytical narrative and theorization, we still want to add to them with alternative analytical strategies. We argue that counter-narratives, which are not part of the dominant narrative around ‘what is going on here’, could still be theoretically interesting and provide value to the research findings.

# Counter-narratives as alternative analytical strategies

According to Alvesson and Kärreman ([2007](#_ENREF_2)), the ability to find and embrace ‘mysteries’ in our fieldwork is the first step towards theory building. A mystery arises as we experience something that runs counter to the dominant and commonsensical understanding of the phenomenon of study and that challenges the conventual way of theorizing and explaining the phenomenon. As such, we may argue that counter-narratives in various shapes and forms are vital in our analytical process and inherent in the process of understanding the ‘what is going on here’ ([Gioia et al., 2012](#_ENREF_27)).

Yet, interestingly, most of our analytical frameworks (as described) appear to be focused on establishing main narratives that are based on the most salient, significant and frequent codes, while excluding what could be essential to the empirical discovery: counter-narratives. Our position is that counter-narratives are possible to find through immersive inquiry, yet it may be difficult as they are often more fragile, subtle, often silent and only hinted at in organizational life. Frandsen et al. ([2016](#_ENREF_21)) argue that “often counter-narratives may only be told within specific storytelling communities […] and thus not shared with others – let alone the curious fieldworker” (p. x). We are not suggesting that counter-narratives are easily accessible, but that the analytical process can be designed in a way that heightens the sensitivity towards counter-narratives. Frandsen et al. ([2016](#_ENREF_21)) point out that counter-narratives often arise as a result of ‘deep hanging out’ ([Geertz, 1998](#_ENREF_26)) – we posit that such deep hanging out is not only a matter of spending time in the field, but also at ‘the desk’ to explore different aspects of the empirical material.

In this section, we present alternative strategies for exploring the empirical material in a way that allows for counter-narratives to be noticed and examined in order to arrive at a richer understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Our three main strategies are developed as counter-points to Aristoteles’ axiomatic laws of identity, non-contradiction, and excluded middle. Each of these strategies also represents different ontological and epistemological perspectives on ‘what counter-narratives are’ and how they might be analysed.

## Alternative to the law of identity: Untold stories and deconstruction

One way to enrich our understanding of counter-narratives is by viewing them as stories silenced by the dominant narrative. Overlooking such counter-narratives in our empirical material might be due to – in Aristotle’s terms of the law of identity – recognizing and identifying merely the A, while at the same time shutting out alternative possibilities of Bs. However, counter-narratives could be a way to also identify the Bs within the A. Izak, Hitchin and Andersson ([2014](#_ENREF_35)), for example, point out the need to consider the stories that are “the neglected, edited out, unintentionally omitted” (p. 2) by dominating narratives. They argue that dominant narratives leave blind spots or counterpoints of silences, and the job of the critical researcher is to deconstruct the dominant narrative to be sensitive to what has been left out. Moreover, they point out that one untold story often renders other stories untold as well. Their point of view is similar to ours in that they highlight that any event can be made sense of in multiple ways and that any topic can be populated with multiple meanings, yet some of these meanings are rejected, ignored and neglected in the dominant narrative. From their perspective, counter-narratives are often located in the non-telling.

One way to ‘hear’ the untold counter-narratives is by deconstructing the dominant narratives. By deconstructing, we come to see what meanings are left out, what alternatives are silenced or what aspects are treated as a taboo within the dominant narrative. Deconstructing strategies are mentioned by Czarniawska ([2004](#_ENREF_13)), Boje ([2001](#_ENREF_8)), and Martin ([1990](#_ENREF_38)). The analytical strategies used in deconstruction includes identifying and dismantling the main dichotomies of the dominant narratives and exploring the silences around what is not said and who’s point of view is not present in the dominant narratives. The deconstruction approach focuses on disruptions and ambiguities to examine the ‘limits’ of what is conceivable within the dominant narrative. A focus on the most peculiar phrases, metaphors or connotations informants use might enable the researcher to deconstruct the dominant narrative in a way that allows for imagination of counter-narratives what has been left out, silenced or made taboo (for more insight on deconstructing see Martin, 1990 and Czarniawska, 2004). Using such deconstruction techniques enables us as critical organizational scholars to pay attention to power-dynamics and the ways in which counter-narratives are excluded: they ‘disappear’ from the ‘managed’ organization and perhaps rather ‘live their life’ in the unmanaged terrain of the organization ([Gabriel, 1995](#_ENREF_23)).

## Alternative to the law of non-contradiction: Multiple stories and ambiguity

Another way to understand counter-narratives is to see every story as a potential counter-narrative, or, in contrary to Aristotle’s standpoint, to acknowledge several multiple narratives as being ‘true’. Instead of excluding one side of a contradiction, the focus is on embracing multiple stories. This enables us to understand how things become enacted or performed as stories and explain the situated enacted of the stories, that is, how the stories we find in our empirical data are often dependent on the social context, time and location of the storytelling ([Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007](#_ENREF_31)). Svane, Gergerich and Boje ([2016](#_ENREF_46)) argue that narratives and counter-narratives emerge out of fractal developments of patterns in the ‘living story web’ which they describe as “open ended and dynamically changing all the time. We understand the living story web as ongoing development of simultaneous, polyphonic, fragmented storylines.” (p. 133). In doing qualitative research, we often face problems as we try to make sense of the ‘living story web’, in which some narratives – while they are not completely silenced or excluded –are not yet fully developed, only hinted at or told in glimpses. The focus of the qualitative researcher is then, from this perspective, not so much on deconstructing dominant narratives but rather on weaving a narrative out of different fragmented stories each attempting to ‘make sense’ ([Weick, 1995](#_ENREF_51); [Weick et al., 2010](#_ENREF_52)) of the “complex soup of ambiguous and half-understood problems, events and experiences” ([Collins & Rainwater, 2005, p. 5](#_ENREF_11)).

In this respect, Boje ([1995](#_ENREF_7)) evokes the metaphor of ‘Tamara’ for understanding how storytelling can be understood in an organizational setting. Tamara is a play that takes place in a house, where various audiences visit different rooms in which different smaller plays are performed. There are simultaneous stories going on simultaneously and the spectators are never able to capture the full play, as they visit different rooms at different times. Boje ([1995](#_ENREF_7)) explains: “*Tamara* is open conversation as a multiplicity of minor narratives; small stories collectively and dynamically constitute, transform, and reform the storytelling organization. Instead of one character acting one story line, there is diversity, multiplicity, and difference” (p. 1031). In organizations and organizational research, this could mean that official stories may be told in one ‘room’, while simultaneous opposing counter-stories are told in other rooms, performed by other organizational members or stakeholders. Reflecting on the metaphor of Tamara opens up to a more complex and nuanced treatment of counter-narratives: the main point is not the counter-narratives in and of themselves, but how the (fragments of) counter-narratives circulate between rooms, across space and time, and are used in different ways by different people, as also pointed out by Hitchin ([2014](#_ENREF_33)).

This has implications for how we analyze our data as we might not – contrary to endeavors fueled by a (post-)positivist logic – find out ‘what *really* happens here’ ([Charmaz, 2014](#_ENREF_10)) but rather investigate how local and alternative understandings and counter-narratives of ‘happenings’ emerge and are performed. For example, Humphreys and Brown ([2002](#_ENREF_34)), in their study of organizational and individual identity narratives at the Westville Institute found that there is never just one story to be told. Similarly, Collins and Rainwater’s ([2005](#_ENREF_11)) analysis of change at Sears shows that the stories – in the eyes of the researcher – can be read as different narratives through continuous re-views in terms of, for example, both a comedy or a tragedy. And Pedersen ([2009](#_ENREF_39)) argues that in analyzing stories it is important to consider not only how certain stories anticipate certain futures (foreshadowing), but that insights may also be found from considering ‘sideshadowing’ – considering the possibilities that might have been taken, but were not. From this perspective, counter-narratives are thus not necessarily seen as opposition to the dominant narratives, but rather as emerging in the form of alternative narratives.

## Alternative to the law of the excluded middle: Tensions, contradictions and paradoxes

According to the third law of thought, there is no middle-ground or third position between contradictions of ‘true’ or ‘not true’. However, when looking closely at contradictions and paradoxes, we might find that often a middle exists in the form of an area of constant tensions and the persisting simultaneous presence of ‘true/not true’. But before we elaborate on this point, we refer to Putnam et al. ([2016](#_ENREF_40)) and their definitions of dialectics, contradictions and paradoxes (p. 6f): dialectics consist of interdependent opposites of a unity in an ongoing dynamic interplay of tensions and push-and-pull; contradictions are mutually exclusive interdependent opposites that define and potentially negate each other; and paradoxes are contradictions that persist over time and develop into seemingly irrational or absurd situations. Moreover, paradoxes mark the ongoing simultaneous presence of contradicting truths ([Fairhurst, Cooren, & Cahill, 2002](#_ENREF_18); [Smith & Lewis, 2011](#_ENREF_44)). These three positions, and the tensions that arise around them, are often what researchers encounter in their fieldwork. For example, Vaara et al. ([2016](#_ENREF_50)) point to complexities and contradictions between narratives of organizational stability and narratives of organizational change operating at the same time. Kreiner et al. ([2015](#_ENREF_37)) coin the term ‘organizational identity elasticity’ to illustrate tensions relating to organizational identity changes through pulling conceptions of identity apart and, at the same time, holding them together, like a rubber band. And Fairhurst et al. ([2002](#_ENREF_18)) explain how contradictions within downsizing strategies arise over missions, values, job expectations and resources.

Research focusing on dialectics and tensions, contractions, and paradoxes demonstrates that narratives often appear in ways that are inherent dialectic as tensions between poles, whose presence also mutually implicate the other’s existence ([Deye & Fairhurst, 2019](#_ENREF_14); [Putnam et al., 2016](#_ENREF_40)). Deye and Fairhurst ([2019](#_ENREF_14)) argue that tensions in organization studies often fall into three overall categories: ‘either-or’ tensions, in which the ends of the poles are seen as mutually exclusive and where one is often selected over the other; ‘both-and’ tensions in which opposites as inseparable and therefore focus on integration and balance between the two; and ‘more-than’ approaches where the focus is on finding new ‘third spaces’ for the tensions’ position ([Deye & Fairhurst, 2019](#_ENREF_14)). Putnam, in Grant and Cox ([2017](#_ENREF_29)), argue that tensions, contradictions and paradoxes in organization seem not to dissolve, but rather evolve and eventually be seen as normal. The idea of studying counter-narratives in forms of tensions is thus not to get rid of tensions, but to focus on how people come to navigate the organizational complexity, contradictions and paradoxes.

Empirical studies revolving around tensions, contradictions and paradoxes often use Charmaz’ ([2014](#_ENREF_10)) grounded theory approach, only to discover that there is a ‘middle’ that the first level open coding could not adequately address; the codes thus need to be re-organized and re-coded to allow for the exploration of contractions in the narratives ([Deye & Fairhurst, 2019](#_ENREF_14); [Kreiner et al., 2015](#_ENREF_37)). For example, Deye and Fairhurst ([2019](#_ENREF_14)) study the tweets of US President Trump and Pope Francis and examine the ambiguous and contradictory ways tensions between truth and post-truth are negotiated in the narratives. Exploring counter-narratives from this approach requires what Putnam in Grant and Cox ([2017](#_ENREF_29)) labels dialectic sensibility in order to explore mixed messages – for example, stemming from clashing management philosophies of bureaucracy and commercialization that may operate simultaneously ([Rasmussen, 2016](#_ENREF_41)). Such dialectic sensibility implies to embrace pluralism in organizational narratives, be aware of opposition, multiple voices and alternative meanings – and to continuously look for ways that two poles continuously exist “within each other and concomitantly define each other” ([Grant & Wolfram Cox, 2017, p. 195](#_ENREF_29)). We argue that dialectic sensibility can be sharpened through looking for what Sonenshein ([2010](#_ENREF_45)) calls ‘disconfirming evidence’ in a continuously loop of re-interpretation of data.

Ongoing tensions and contradictions – to mention a prominent example from critical management studies – can also be found around issues of power and resistance, which are often not binary but emerging in a relationship where power and resistance are mutually constitutive ([Collinson, 1994](#_ENREF_12); [Thomas & Davies, 2005](#_ENREF_47); [Zoller & Fairhurst, 2007](#_ENREF_53)). Thomas and Davis ([2005](#_ENREF_47)), for instance, view resistance, instead of being diametrically opposed to managerial power, as “a multidimensional, fluid and generative understanding of power and agency” (p. 700). As such we may find organizational members to construct, reinforce, contest, struggle with power – at times simultaneously ([Fleming & Spicer, 2007](#_ENREF_19)). The mutually constitutive aspects of counter-narratives and dominant narratives have also been pointed out by Gabriel ([2016](#_ENREF_24)) as he explores the role of counter-narratives in narrative ecologies.

## A comment on writing: Exploring different styles

It appears to be inescapable that all qualitative research implies some form of reduction of complexity and the ‘messiness’ of the field in our efforts of engage in our academic “story work” ([Donnelly, Gabriel, & Özkazanç-Pan, 2013](#_ENREF_15)). Yet, we think it is important to highlight that while most studies continuously seem to deploy commonsense coding often based on grounded theory, such approaches can be enriched with alternative analytical strategies in the form of counter-narratives as pointed out earlier. In addition, we can also resort to other forms of writing that are less sanitized ([Donnelly et al., 2013](#_ENREF_15)) and formulaic ([Czarniawska, 2004](#_ENREF_13)) – yet arguably more meaningful ([Alvesson, Gabriel, & Paulsen, 2017](#_ENREF_1)). In this sense, Grey and Sinclair ([2006](#_ENREF_30)) argue for the need to reconsider our way of writing in academia to become less pompous, impenetrable and occupied with posture.

Ellingson ([2014](#_ENREF_17)), for instance, argues that a truthful account of a complex social situation can rarely be expressed in a single, unequivocal statement, and that scholars therefore should aim for more complex representation of their research. In this regard, Ellingson ([2014](#_ENREF_17)) suggests using multiple lenses of studying and analysing and multiple genres (including more artistic forms) of writing to provide thick descriptions ([Geertz, 1973](#_ENREF_25)). Ellingson ([2014](#_ENREF_17)) also proposes to use the analytical framework of ‘crystallization’ to engage in deep and complex interpretation of a phenomenon, opening up for multiple findings, multiple voices and multiple genres. Other ways of illustrating sameness and simultaneous differences can be found in portrait-based ethnographic narratives ([Frandsen, 2015](#_ENREF_20)) or in narrative forms of representation that highlight personal experiences of exclusion, marginalization and silencing is a way to give voice to the untold counter-narratives. Especially within the tradition of critical auto-ethnography ([Frandsen & Pelly, In press](#_ENREF_22)) the hidden is brought forward in form of untold stories that are made visible. Jonas, Adam and Ellis ([2016](#_ENREF_36)), citing Tillmann ([2009](#_ENREF_48)), for example, state that autoethnography “breaks silences around experiences as they unfold within cultures and cultural practices. In privileging subjectivity, personal voice, emotional experience, autoethnographies subvert traditional norms of scholarships that silence the ‘complex and fragility’ of life” (p. 35). These varied forms of writing allow counter-narratives to be told, voiced, examined and celebrated in a way that honors complexity, controversy, polyphony and power dynamics. “Turning a blind eye to counter-narratives leaves us with a rather one-dimensional understanding of organizational phenomena of any kind” ([Frandsen et al., 2016, p. 8](#_ENREF_21)).

# Conclusions

In this chapter we aimed to emphasize the value of counter-narratives ([Bamberg & Andrews, 2004](#_ENREF_5)) in qualitative research analysis and in so doing we have advanced our theoretical and methodological understanding of counter-narratives in three different way.

First, we have pointed to what we call ‘common sense coding’ based on Aristotle’s classic laws of thought (the laws of identity, non-contradiction, and the excluded middle). Common sense coding is typically concerned with finding out “what *really* happened” ([Tracy, 2013, p. 40](#_ENREF_49)) based on various accounts of informants and often with a (post-)positivist agenda in mind. This common sense approach is often preoccupied with finding the most frequent codes that point to a theme, selecting the most salient codes for developing a theme, or picking the most convincing codes in terms of a pre-formulated research idea. We argue that attempts of finding out ‘what really happened’ are often guided by commonsensical reasoning that limits theoretical insights if not enriched with alternative analytical strategies. Researchers using common sense coding might end up producing a convincing, coherent, and ‘smooth’ research narrative, while excluding counter-narratives that would have the (creative) potential to interfere with this smoothness of the main narrative through challenging it. We argue that in the construction of a convincing and coherent research narrative through common sense coding, other, less frequent, nearly silent or merely whispered accounts of counter-narratives might often be overlooked or brushed aside. Through common sense coding, thus, potentially interesting and meaningful aspects of the empirical material might be overlooked and left out.

Second, we have pointed to different ways of understanding and using counter-narratives, which are typically defined as relating to a more ‘dominant’ narrative in an oppositional manner ([Bamberg & Andrews, 2004](#_ENREF_5)). We propose three different perspectives on counter-narratives that highlight counter-narratives as a) untold stories or stories silenced by the dominant narrative, b) stories that represent alternative versions of what is ‘true’ and b) stories emerging as (middle) part of tensions, contradictions and paradoxes in organizational life. As such, we argue for the need to engage in a more nuanced understanding of counter-narratives that can better account for the messiness of organizational life and still embrace critical inquiry into the power dynamics that dominate.

Third, we want to bring together three different alternative analytical strategies, which embrace these more diverse forms of counter-narratives to achieve a richer and more nuanced understanding when working with ambiguous, messy and potentially ‘mystery-bearing’ empirical data. These alternative analytical strategies challenge the three classic laws of thought: 1) challenging the law of identity through ‘finding B’s within the A’ in untold stories and the deconstructing of dominant narratives, 2) challenging the law of non-contradiction through embracing multiple and ambiguous stories emerging at the same time, and 3) challenging the law of the excluded middle through accounting for the ‘middle’ in the form of ongoing tensions, contradictions and paradoxes. We suggest that various different voices – even thought they might lead to commonsensical confusion in form of untold stories, hints, tensions, ambiguities and paradoxes – can provide important theoretical insights. Each of the three alternative analytical strategies can serve as guideline for ‘hanging’ out with the data at the desk in way that allows the researcher to re-view and re-discover counter-narrative in future studies of organizations.

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1. We acknowledge different traditions around using the terms ‘stories’ and ‘narratives’. Here we generally use the terminology used in our references. We typically see stories as part of a micro-level living story web, as described by Svane, Gergerich and Boje (2016), from which dominant narratives may emerge. Counter-narratives may take different forms on both ‘story-level’ and ‘narrative-level’ as will be examined in this chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/common-sense> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)