

MANAGING BOUNDARIES: THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES AT A 9-1-1 CALL
CENTER

by

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A THESIS

Presented to the Folklore Program
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

December 2012

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Title: Managing Boundaries: The Role of Narratives at a 9-1-1 Call Center

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Degree awarded December 2012

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts

Folklore Program

December 2012

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Dispatchers and calltakers who work at 9-1-1 call centers are confronted with memories of emergencies they must address at work even though they are not physically present at the event. The language they use to talk about their work thus always references a potentially traumatic experience processed second-hand. These telecommunicators use personal messaging through the dispatch platform, verbal communication, and texting in cellphones to tell stories about their work and manage emergency response. Often two to three mediums are used in order to communicate different aspects of the same narrative. Through storytelling, dispatchers manage an environment influenced by social hierarchies, workplace command structures, gender dynamics, and the emotional stress of the calls they must process. The fragmented experiences of dispatchers are reflected in the disjointed methods and narrative structures of their storytelling. This study offers an approach to multi-modal communication and presents an analysis of an occupational folk group not previously studied by folklorists.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express sincere appreciation to Professor Daniel Wojcik for the encouragement to finish this project, insights into my analysis and general guidance on this and other projects. I also thank Professor Lisa Gilman for her assistance with the sections pertaining to gender and narratives, her editing assistance and help at the early stages of this project in her fieldwork methods class. I also acknowledge all the operations floor employees at the Bureau of Emergency Communications for giving me the freedom to conduct this study. I thank specific co-workers for letting me interview them, even when the interviews contained difficult subject matter. I also am especially grateful to my academy, Emily, Erika, Heidi, Ryan, and Shannon, for always being there for me at work, discussing this project with me and tolerating my “venting sessions.” I also wish to thank Professor Sharon Sherman for her assistance at the start of the project and my time in the Folklore program. Also thanks to Professor John Fenn and his input on multi-modal narratives in another project that informed the analysis in this thesis. Lastly, for my parents who encouraged me through both my careers, as a folklorist and a senior dispatcher at BOEC.

For Adam. From hundred block flash cards to passive voice, neither project would have been successful without you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Dispatchers at a 9-1-1 call center use personal messaging through the dispatch platform and verbal communication to tell stories about their work. Through storytelling, dispatchers manage an environment influenced by several social hierarchies and workplace command structures. In this thesis, I examine these storytelling practices and explore the implications of an expressive culture of storytelling. This storytelling occurs through computers, in person, and sometimes in both mediums. Often two to three mediums are used in order to communicate different aspects of the same narrative. The fragmented experiences of dispatchers are reflected in the fragmented methods and narrative structures of storytelling. These fragmented experiences of dispatchers are emotional and also physical since dispatchers often must manage communication with multiple people at once and in the appropriate tone. Yet these experiences are not considered direct in that dispatchers are not physically present at the scenes they manage and interact with. They usually only visualize a partial picture of a call for service as an event is communicated through the voice of the citizen making the call. They might never know the outcome of a call for service whether it is traumatic or not. At the same time, these fragmented narratives support a highly structured social hierarchy that maintains itself outside the official designations of the workplace seniority and official management practices.

Emergency Telecommunicators, better known as 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers, respond to phone calls from individuals in emergency situations who

need assistance from police officers, firefighters, paramedics or referrals. Calltakers obtain information from the caller and dispatchers relay the call for service to the appropriate source. Responders then go to the location of the call for service. Calltakers use technology to interact with callers in the outside world from which they are physically detached. Dispatchers and calltakers manage relationships between citizens, calltakers, other dispatchers and first responders. In turn, dispatchers at a 9-1-1 call center are impacted by the structure of the radio systems, phones and computer programs they use and the physical layout of their workplace. The structure of these devices and the information accessible within the computer manage the conditions of their interactions with other employees on the operations floor, as well as responders and citizens. For example, a citizen may want to know an officer's days off from work but calltakers cannot provide this information since it is not accessible in the computer. As another example, the direct messaging among employees in the Computer Aided Dispatch, also referred to as CAD, system is accessible and open to anyone on the operations floor, who can examine the history of a work terminal and see what any one employee has been messaging to other employees. Dispatchers often remark on how technology influences their interactions with people outside the operations floor. However, it is much less frequent that 9-1-1 dispatchers consider how these mediums influence their communication with each other in a stressful workplace especially when these technologies are used multi-modally. Gender dynamics, issues brought about by the emotional stress of the calls dispatchers and calltakers deal with, and management of relationships of power within the workplace all influence the narratives told in the workplace. Standards of work performance influence a complex workplace

hierarchy and storytelling plays a role in maintaining this hierarchy. This hierarchy is then reflected back in the storytelling practices of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers as I will analyze in this thesis.

Foundations of the Project

This thesis project is based on my experiences and observations as an employee at the Bureau of Emergency Communications, the Portland 9-1-1 dispatch center. My project provides an emic perspective on the vernacular performances and vernacular dynamics of 9-1-1 dispatch culture. Although there has been previous research on the structure of calls for 9-1-1 service, to my knowledge this project is the first analysis of this occupational subculture, which consists of a group of workers who exist in a stressful, transitional and ever-changing environment. Previous studies such as Whalen, Zimmerman and Whalen's study "When Words Fail," an analysis of delayed medical response in Dallas, Texas resulting from a mishandled 9-1-1 phone call, as well as Zimmerman's "The Interactional Organization of Calls for Emergency Assistance," have analyzed the conversations in 9-1-1 calls for service between calltakers and callers requesting help. Although these studies have been influential in understanding how callers request help, and how these requests can be mishandled in certain instances, this type of analysis does not constitute the central theme of my thesis. Instead I examine the culture of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers and the narratives shared between these employees while they are working. 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers respond to the voices of callers and responders, often mediating between life and death and assisting people in situations of violence, sickness, or mental health crisis. As a 9-1-1 dispatcher, I

have access to communicative events on a daily basis and understand the structure of these events and the discourse in the workplace in a way no outside observer could. In reality there would be no way to be a participant observer in this workplace, one can only be an observer or a participant. In the workplace I am able to observe face-to-face communication among my co-workers, which occurs in the 150 foot by 60 foot room where I work. This communication takes the form of a personal conversation about work or an urgent communication about a call. I also participate in and observe the sharing of stories in our computer-aided dispatch system. Stories exist in both realms, existing partially as orally performances and partially in the computer or a cell phone and sometimes only in one medium.

Because of the structure of work at a 9-1-1 call center storytelling can start as oral narratives and conclude in the computer when the teller is unable to finish speaking because of interruptions by work duties. Conversely, a narrative can begin as a computer generated form of communication, and then become a verbally communicated narrative. Dispatchers and calltakers are allowed free time for conversation when they are not working but they can be interrupted with work that must be immediately tended to at any moment. As a result, a story will be told with several breaks in it because of interrupting radio transmissions or phone calls. Consequently, verbal narratives are often disjointed and can contain segments that are typed communications in the direct messaging system in the Computer Aided Dispatch system that may complete the final thoughts of a narrative. Sometimes these messages that are typed into Computer Aided Dispatch system can be one line jokes. For example, one calltaker hears another one calltaker joking with a drunk caller. The calltaker might send a direct

message to the calltaker on the phone about the one side of the conversation they are overhearing. This message humorously interacts with the part of the conversation the calltaker “eavesdropping” can overhear. Communication about work occurs in direct messages, since this is the main way calltakers and dispatchers communicate, but the direct messaging system in the computer is also used for vernacular expression.

The Position of the 9-1-1 Dispatcher and Calltaker

In my research, I explore the unusual situation that 9-1-1 dispatchers are confronted with: their memories of emergencies and traumas are not associated with a visual or physical experience of events that they encounter. Most often dispatchers do not know the outcome of any emergency call they receive. This creates a particular type of communication, as the language used to talk about calls is always referencing an experience processed through a phone, computer or radio encounter. As dispatchers and calltakers, our experiences are never physical, but they reference the physical experiences of callers and first responders. This is one of the ways storytelling at a 9-1-1 call center is fragmented. However, by analyzing the communicative events of a community of 9-1-1 dispatchers, the relationship between narrative events occurring orally, in the computer, and hybrid narratives can be explored in the context of this fragmentation. Examining such storytelling and communication can lead to a better understanding of how fragmented narrative events can structure a cohesive culture. Furthermore, analyzing such narratives provides insights into how storytelling takes place in contemporary society, as many people tell stories both orally, and by means of a computer or other electronic device, often using

various mediums for one narrative event. An individual might also reference communicative events that occurred solely in one medium in passing while communicating in another medium.

Foundations of the Project in Previous Folklore Research

This project is grounded in the previous research by folklorists on workplace behaviors, including the work of Jack Santino, Archie Green, Robert McCarl, Michael Owen Jones, and Timothy Tangherlini. This study contributes to an ongoing dialogue on the importance of expressive culture in an occupational setting and adds to an understanding of how work, as a large part of most people's lives, impacts personal identity and cultural expression. My project offers a more complete and dynamic understanding of how workers now communicate through a variety of mediums. The foundations of this project come from my interest in occupational folklore. Initially, this project sought to examine the expressive culture of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers with the end goal of creating a picture of a workplace often overlooked by citizens and allied disciplines. However, as the study progressed it became apparent that the expression of narratives was one of the most important elements of the workplace culture, and it serves as my primary focus in my analysis. My interest in online communication, which has been further developed in other projects, initially influenced my interest in computer-mediated communication in the workplace. As a result, much my analysis in this project is structured around the work of folklorists studying occupational culture and influenced by my insights into online communication. Later in the project the work research conducted on oral narrative by folklorists was brought to this work. By drawing on these

different areas of scholarship I believe I have created a bounded group of study that helps folklorists tackle the changes in the structure and method of narrative communication brought about by new technological developments that have occurred during the first part of the 21st century. Consequently, as many folklorists who study online culture have done I have bounded my study of expressive communication around one group, my workplace, in order to analyze multi-modal narrative in a setting approachable by one folklorist. Trevor Blank introduces the anthology *Folklore and the Internet* with the following quote. “For this book, and hopefully beyond it, folklore should be considered to be the outward expression of creativity--in myriad forms and interactions--by individuals and their communities. The debate then falls to what constitutes *creativity* or even what constitutes *community*. That should be the job of the folklorist to argue cogently one way or another.”¹ The boundaries of the community studied, and one might argue the tools of communication being used, are for the researcher to explore and define. In this regard, it is important to define the communities or pathways of information one is studying online. Studying folklore online, or mediated through computers, requires that a researcher must be forthcoming about these boundaries and definitions. Further research on multi-modal communication is necessary—both close research on single narrative events and larger theoretical implications of this type of communication in the field of folklore.

The findings in this study are applicable to other areas of folkloric expression since much of the behavior analyzed by folklorists in many cultures now has some element of the communicative processes that are mediated

¹ Blank, *Folklore and the Internet*, 6.

through a computer in one way or another. There has been recent research done from a folkloric perspective on communication occurring solely online, yet more work is needed for a better understanding of how communication through computers impacts oral communication when narratives occur in both mediums. Outside of the academic context, by having workers analyze their behavior, employees may develop a better understanding of why they act and react in the ways that they do. At a 9-1-1 dispatch center, which is always a stressful and at times confrontational place, an analysis of communicative behavior in the context of the workplace construction could help my coworkers and I analyze our behaviors constructively. My research thus may be useful in presenting and recommending ways to address problems in the workplace. I believe by discussing narrative events and understanding how structure and forms of communication in the workplace function, 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers may be better able understand the culture of the workplace with positive repercussions.

Why Storytelling?

When I began my research at the Bureau of Emergency Communication in Portland, Oregon where I am employed as a senior dispatcher, I expected to find a significant number of narratives devoted to “the extremes,” the worst calls the most “traumatic” experiences that my coworkers had encountered. While these narratives certainly exist they are usually shared verbally and are typically only shared when there is a lengthy amount of time to talk to fully explore the experience. This might include the four or five times a worker is able to meet up with a friend from work outside of the workplace. This is usually a complicated

process since almost no employee works the same shift with the same days off as any other employee. Further analysis, from a multi-modal perspective, of the three types of storytelling events I will discuss later shows that while extreme traumatic calls are the subject of storytelling, without a multi-modal analysis we would miss more pervasive underlying fears in the workplace than that of the “worst call” lurking in the phone queues.

In a multi-modal analysis, we must look at the stories on the operations floor that exist in multiple modes of communication. For example, one dispatcher must use a computer and dispatch calls to officers over the radio. The other two dispatchers who were having a conversation with this dispatcher keep talking. They send a humorous message referencing their continuing conversation in a direct message (which is similar to an instant message) to the dispatcher who is working. She reads the humorous message in the computer, while officers are talking to her on the radio and she is listening to their communications, and turns to her coworkers to laugh at the joke while her microphone is not transmitting but the officers are still talking. She returns to the radio and answers the officer while also typing a response in a direct message. In the case of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers we might offer some analysis, examine or narrate about our traumatic calls, but we seem to be stuck, as a workplace community, on a broken record of complaints about minor frustrations. Some of the members of our group, and our supervisory management, think of us as complainers, although the operations floor staff, in contrast to management, can see value in our complaints. As we will explore in this thesis, there are narratives centered on trauma, and these narratives are

significant, and a multi-modal analysis illuminates dispatcher's and calltaker's concerns in a way that expresses the extreme detail oriented nature of their work.

In his study of paramedic narratives, folklorist Timothy Tangherlini points out important elements of context removed from storytelling sessions when medics tell stories to nonmedics. He states, "the audience is in no position to provide other stories, and therefore the frequent give and take of medic storytelling is absent. Furthermore, the storytelling loses its didactic and enculturating qualities, since the audience is neither in need of information about possible scenes nor in the process of becoming medics themselves."² And perhaps most importantly, Tangherlini notes that storytelling is not an act of debriefing for the medic when it is told to non-medics. For 9-1-1 calltakers and dispatchers, the question "what is the worst call you have ever taken?" is inherently alienating. It forces the dispatcher to either lie, answer with a truthful story that most likely will and upset the questioner, to tell a story that raises feelings in the dispatcher that are unpleasant. As one of my interviewees notes, those outside of this workplace may be able to imagine what they think is the worst story or experience, but they really can't imagine or understand what call is actually the worst. And they can't imagine that such calls never stop.

There are three types of narrative events that occur at a 9-1-1 call center: cautionary stories, first time stories, and venting sessions. These types of narratives are significant when they are told within the community of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers. The layout of the workplace allows for storytelling because coworkers are in a small enough room and can often over hear one another, which negates the fact we are tethered to desk by four foot cords. It also

² Tangherlini, *Talking Trauma*, 176.

allows for multi-modal storytelling since we are allowed to have cellphones and use them to communicate when the ease of direct messaging in the computer aided dispatch system, which is public record, is outweighed by the sensitive nature of what we might say. So, the inherent structure of the Computer Aided Dispatch platform impacts what we can and cannot say. Furthermore, employees know when other employees are taking traumatic calls or know they are dealing with “hot” incidents, because of notifications sent out in the computer aided dispatch program and the proximity of workers in the room, which often causes employees to elicit stories from one another. Storytelling is significant at a 9-1-1 call center for all the reasons Tangherlini notes in his study of paramedics. Other 9-1-1 call takers and dispatchers can provide similar stories and storytelling within the community becomes significant in the same way it is significant for paramedics. Tangherlini continues his statement quoted above, “finally, these nonmedic storytelling contexts do not provide the debriefing quality of cohort storytelling, Thus, there is little motivation for the telling of medic stories to nonmedic audiences.”³ Although Tangherlini’s work on paramedics also notes storytelling does not exist among dispatchers I have found this is not the case in the community I examine and work in. Furthermore, the types of storytelling and storytelling events at a 9-1-1 call center demonstrate new type of multi-modal communication that folklorists need to analyze further.

³ Ibid.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the book *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes: Laborlore Explorations*, Archie Green states: "I would like my book's recollections and research to aid young workers who will eventually cast their own identities in timber, metal, glass and stone. In this sense, techniques and tools merge into essential humanity."⁴ Green's work is strongly framed in the context created by unionized labor and the culture and environment created under these conditions. The importance of unionized labor, if not significantly diminished since Green coined the term laborlore in the 1950s, at the very least frames a different workplace culture now than it did when unionized workplaces were more prevalent in the United States. However, Green continues by stating, "The freshest apprentices at present shiplaunching ways or rocket pads need only to look over their shoulders to encounter friendly bards casting spells . . . workers will continue to encrust experience, to externalize belief, and to create vernacular texts while building docks, spinning cotton, mucking ore, and performing endless varied tasks."⁵ Whether workplaces look the same contemporarily as they did when Green studied them is perhaps irrelevant, since Green recognizes vernacular culture will shape workplaces regardless of changes in work cultures.

Aspects of Green's analysis focus on laborlore specifically tied to trade unions. Under the rubric of laborlore, which I argue might apply to all of occupational folklore, he defines laborlore as "expressivity by workers

⁴ Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes*, 457.

⁵ Ibid.

themselves and their allies: utterance, representation, symbol, code, artifact, belief, ritual,"⁶ which incorporates the possibility for change within the workplace. Regardless of structural changes and across professional boundaries, it acknowledges that expressive culture in the workplace will continue to exist. In what follows, I provide an overview and assessment of the study of expressive culture in the workplace within the field of folklore studies, beginning with the focus on the types of workers studied by scholars like Green and concluding with an analysis of current scholarship on occupational folklore. After this discussion of the literature I provide an analysis of current folkloric scholarship on computer-mediated expressive communication as well as perspectives on computer-mediated communication from other fields that helps frame my study. This review lays the groundwork for the analysis of narratives and storytelling within occupational folklore studies and the potential intersections with current research on computer-mediated communication.

Laborlore and Occupational Folklore Studies

George Korson's work with miners was one of the first examples of occupational folklore studies in the United States. Unlike later studies of occupational folklore, which often focused solely on expression, Korson also included political facets in his research. An excerpt from his book *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* contains the following analysis. "They created a culture of their own from inner resources playing upon everyday experiences. But there was nothing self-conscious about their creation. It was carried through with casual unawareness

⁶ Ibid., 7.

of any cultural value . . . but what distinguished bituminous folklore . . . was that it came not from a single region of a single national group but from a basic industry like coal mining whose workers had come from many countries and belonged to many races.”⁷ His significant interpretation is that occupational folklore is centered on the occupation, incorporating several ethnic groups who might have been studied separately at the time instead in one study.

Around the time Korson was doing his research, WPA projects, centering on the experiences of everyday life, were also being conducted. Although not all of these were conducted by folklorists, the study and collection of materials from occupational groups also occurred during this project. In general, early insights into occupational cultures focused on “recourse based trades” and were connected to regional identities centered on these trades.⁸ This included the study of mining, farming, ranching and timber communities and often contributed to romantic notions of these communities. Several later developments, such as Richard Dorson’s move to study expressions of folklore in the city, have been instrumental in reshaping how occupational folklore has been approached by folklorists in the United States. However, calls by scholars such as Wayland Hand, for comparative occupational folklore studies, have largely not been heeded. A brief discussion of how occupational folklore has been approached by European scholars will help us conceptualize this field of study.

While European folklorists have studied occupational folklore they have done so from a different perspective. Their work is more politically-minded, in that it references class consciousness and often addresses the role of Marxism in

⁷ Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle*, 20.

⁸ McCarl, “Occupational Folklore,” 596.

European worker's movements. In general, the study of occupational folklife in Europe has intersected with work culture and labor ideology and in the United States it has focused on cultural expression. Many folklorists in the United States do not explore the social and political contexts of occupational culture to the same extent European folklorists have. The introduction to *Worker lore and labour lore* Flemming Hemmersam, who is a prominent European folklorist interested in occupational folklore, states "the study of working-class lore is regarded in this paper, as a subdivision of a science of working-class cultural history which, along with other disciplines, analyses and describes the cultural sphere and lore of the ruled classes."⁹ He distinguishes between labour lore, specifically connected to unions, and worker lore which is more general to the working class. Other work by European folklorists, such as Ulla-Maija Peltonen demonstrate some of the key differences between occupational folklore in the United States and occupational folklore in Europe. Peltonen's opening sentences to her chapter *Historical Memory and Collective Tradition in Working-class Folklore* demonstrate this difference easily when she states: "the historical narrative tradition can be interpreted as a tradition of narration associated with historical consciousness: at issue is a person's and society's consciousness of being bound up with history."¹⁰ Comparable Marxist analysis and language is less frequent in American folklore studies, but is present in some work by folklorists in the United States such as Jose Limon and Archie Green¹¹ whose work is informed by theories of oppositional culture. This brief overview provides context for examining the

⁹ Hemmersam, "Worker lore and labour lore," 17.

¹⁰ Peltonen, "Historical Memory and Collective Tradition in Working-class Folklore," 219.

¹¹ McCarl, "Occupational Folklore," 596.

perspective of these scholars who have devoted significant portions of their research to occupational folklore.

Indeed, there is a marked difference in the styles of analysis conducted by three of the main American scholars of occupational folklore: Archie Green, Michael Owen Jones and Robert McCarl. Each has different goals and perspectives when they approach expressive culture in the workplace. Aspects of each of these three approaches have implications and merit for researchers of workplace culture. As Alan Dundes notes in his presentation of xerographic folklore, “in the nineteenth century and to some extent in the twentieth, the folk were thought to be rural and illiterate as opposed to urban and literate. In addition, folklore was defined in part on the basis of the means of its transmission. Specifically, folklore was said to be *orally* transmitted from person to person and from generation to generation. These definitions of folk and folklore essentially precluded the idea that a literate, urban folk might transmit written folklore. And yet literate urban office workers and others do in fact transmit written folklore.”¹² Even before this, a redefinition of which types of workers were subject to folkloristically-based study occurred. During the rethinking of theoretical perspectives in the field of folklore during the 1970s and 1980s, laborlore played an important role in representing the changes within the field. The study of labor began to move away from idealized folk groups (such as Appalachian miners and Western cowboys) and towards the whole spectrum of the workforce. This also entailed frequent connections to corporate organizational studies and cultural advocacy, popular themes at the time.¹³

¹²Dundes, *Office Folklore*, 115.

Archie Green's incorporation of a *Working Americans* section into the Smithsonian Folklife festival, first initiated in 1973, signaled the growing importance of occupational folklore within the field. Green was also instrumental in getting public funding for occupational folklore. Later, the perspectives of Robert McCarl and Michael Owen Jones were influential. McCarl's stated conception of occupational folklore focuses "not only on the verbal forms of occupational jargon and narrative, but also on the customs designed to mark an individual's passage through a respective career, as well as the various skills and techniques which must be informally learned and performed by a worker in any job."¹⁴ McCarl, like other scholars of occupational folklore, considers the transmission and the importance of technique and skill within a workplace as a key factor in defining an individual workers role within the workplace. McCarl highlights his "shopfloor approach."

Michael Owen Jones presents what McCarl perceived to be a different perspective. Jones states "distinctions between institutional symbols and folklore assume importance in studies of organizational symbolism in regard to documentation analysis, and intervention. Are they managerial symbols, created as a means of control, or are the examples of symbolic behavior generated spontaneously by organization members as a way of making sense of situations, expressing feelings, coping with vicissitudes, or even opposing management?"¹⁵ Furthermore Jones notes that, "although some symbols are institutional (e.g., architecture, logos, company posters and slogans, annual reports, award

¹³ Santino, "The Outlaw Emotions," 319.

¹⁴ McCarl, "Occupational Folklore," 71.

¹⁵ Jones, *Studying Organizational Symbolism*, 10.

ceremonies), much of symbolic behavior in organizations is folklore, that is, traditional expression learned and manifested as people interact with one another."¹⁶ Jones considers the role of management in the workplace as a bureaucratic system, but also recognizes that the managers themselves have an important role to play in the definition of a workplace. He notes the tendency of folklore research, especially from the 1980s, to focus on lower level employees and disregard the lore of the organization as a whole or that of the managers.¹⁷ These three scholars of occupational folklore influenced my approach to this analysis of 9-1-1 dispatcher and calltaker culture. Similar to McCarl, I work quite literally from the shopfloor, but Jones's consideration of the entire workplace and its system is significant as well.

Analysis of Narrative in Occupational Folklore

Jones also identifies the importance of narrating in an organization's setting, and like others he understands that storytelling is not significant because it is relating the features of a factual event. Rather, representations are created through a reflexive relationship between the narrator and audience being acted on by reciprocity.¹⁸ "Although the intentions of storytellers and the interpretations of listeners are not always easy for researchers to pin down, the narrating is clearly meaningful to participants; further storytelling shapes the organization and members' understanding of it."¹⁹ This relationship is of key

¹⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹⁷ Jones, "A Folklorist's Approach to Organizational Behavior (OB) and Organization Development (OD)," 120.

¹⁸ Jones, *Studying Organizational Symbolism*, 2.

importance to storytelling especially among a group of coworkers who share many different types of stories with each other, each of which is framed in specific contexts or repeating types of events. Within the context of a specific workplace “communicative competence,” a narrator's understanding that an audience or individual can be responsible for understanding the material a narrator presents in a way an outsider could not, is especially important, given that many outside the community often do not understand the full implications of a narrative.²⁰ However, there is an intersection between institutional symbols and informal workplace context. It is from this intersection that narratives emerge from worker’s experiences. As noted, Jones encourages the researcher to consider the whole scope of the organization’s lore, since it is reflexive and will incorporate all members of the organization, even management.

Similarly Jack Santino recognizes in *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle*, that narratives shared among Pullman porters come out of and speak to the occupational experience. Some become traditional, since they are told by several different porters, and become “mechanisms for identifying occupational relationships and maintaining group membership.”²¹ The intangible heritage of workers is developed through narratives to manage workplace traditions and structure. As previous scholarship has shown, while workplaces and workers possess numerous examples of folklore and possibilities for folkloristically-based research, worker's narratives stand out as an especially important form of expression on which to conduct research.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, 11.

²¹ Santino, *Miles of Smiles, Years of Struggle*, 5.

This brief reference to the work of Jones and Santino illustrates the importance of narration and storytelling in the workplace and the significance of these practices from each of their perspectives in framing their study of occupational folklore. In particular, the research by Tangherlini on paramedics is useful to my study because of some similarities in culture between the two groups. Tangherlini's *Talking Trauma* does briefly examine the role of dispatchers in the workplace he studied. However, he mostly focuses on the conflicts between field personnel and dispatchers in a chapter where he also discusses conflicts between field personnel and management. I would argue there are no two communications centers exactly the same, whether it is because of structure or because of culture, and therefore some of Tangherlini's appraisals of dispatch are not directly applicable to the 9-1-1 call center I examine. However, there are direct correlations between the role of storytelling for paramedics and the role of storytelling at a 9-1-1 call center. Tangherlini notes many medics take an "ironic and self-deprecatory stance" which is found in many medics stories and "is one of the most common stylistic aspects of paramedic storytelling."²² Similar tones are often found in the performance of storytelling at a 9-1-1 call center. 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers are also sandwiched in between opposing forces, similar to paramedics, and many stories told at a 9-1-1 call center mirror stories Tangherlini collected from paramedics illustrating these confrontations. In Jack Santino's assessment the network of relationships in a job is complex and the number of factors and relationships can become quite numerous in certain professions. He posits that "narratives arise along each of these relationships, and

²² Tangherlini, *Talking Trauma*, 26.

allow aggressive feelings fictive release."²³ Along each relationship between employees a boundary is formed and narrative or symbolic events can develop in order to ease or otherwise all the acting out of the tensions created by this boundary. This can be within the workplace, because of seniority or skill, or outside the workplace, with customers or other groups that a workforce commonly interacts with.

In the specific instance of airline flight attendants and pilots, Santino notes the nature of the relationship results in pranking between the two job groups. "Such occupational pranking in the airlines is frequent and ongoing. Upon examination it appears that the tensions inherent in the structure of the job relationships with pilots are both expressed and alleviated by means of this indirect expression of aggression."²⁴ In the same article, in which Santino compares flight attendants and Pullman porters, he notes pranking and jokes are possible between flight attendants and pilots because there is some understanding or identification between the two groups. However, such joking relationships were not common among Pullman porters because of the difference in tensions in this workplace. For example, engineers and others perceived the porters as possible threats to their workplace status. In contrast the pilots were never susceptible to the possibility that flight attendants might threaten their job security. In occupational folklore, boundaries between job classifications or jobs that are in frequent contact with one another (i.e., paramedic and nurse or police dispatcher and police officer) develop behaviors like the pranking Santino studied. Narratives also illustrate the nature of boundaries within a workplace

²³Santino, "Characteristics of Occupational Narratives," 212.

²⁴Santino, "A Servant and a Man, a Hostess or a Woman," 316.

and between job classifications. In this study of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers boundaries within the workplace and boundaries with allied disciplines structure the narratives told in the workplace and often provide the motivation for narration.

Computer-Mediated Communication

In an article entitled “Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication,” Angela Garcia, Alecea Standlee, Jennifer Bechkoff and Yan Cui consider the visual aspects of computer-mediated communication in the context of the ethnographer's approach to “offline” participant observation. They state, “online ethnographers should also take care to integrate visual aspects of the data into their observations and analysis and treat visual data (e. g., the use of pictures, colors, page layout, and graphic design of Web sites) as a key aspect of the online location.”²⁵ What is significant in this statement is that it should not just be taken for granted that communication in computers is instantaneous. The visual aspects of a computer platform are important to the user as are the coded structures in the computer that are invisible which allow for communication to occur. The residual artifacts of communication, such as the text recorded in computer messaging, does have significance; however we must also consider the processes behind these artifacts of interaction, the processes that allow these artifacts to be created.

Most studies of contemporary occupational folklore today would occur in workplaces somehow impacted by computer-mediated communication or

²⁵ Garcia et al., “Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication,” 62.

cellphone-mediated communication. When examining non-oral narrative expression scholars should consider the technological mechanisms that circulate this expression. Undoubtedly the structure of the computer programming and platforms on which this expression is occurring impacts the text artifacts folklorists are studying. The limitations of platforms are just one example of how communication can be altered, or become differently structured, when mediated through a computer. Even a simple example, like the length of text inputted into a message, will impact expression. Twitter is a good example of this, as it has an one hundred forty character limitation on text length. The direct messaging system in computer-aided dispatch also has a limit. This limit of approximately two hundred and eighty five characters means that lengthy descriptions in a narrative might get cut off or an employee might choose not to share a longer narrative in a direct message. There are always implications for how communication is structured in computers based on the defined boundaries of the platform used. In the case of my analysis, my thoughts about these defined boundaries have been influenced by the work of scholars studying communication existing solely online.

Fieldwork conducted entirely online presents an evolving context for researchers. Some researchers have undertaken work which incorporates online elements and in person elements. In Jonathan Skinner's analysis of online ethnography, he observes that "In both settings – face-to-face and computer-mediated – communicative interaction is virtual and imaginative (in Anderson's sense of the word) as well as part physical: there is the presence of computers and sentences, and the presence of bodies and speech, all of which are received

and interpreted internally.”²⁶ Skinner refers us to Benedict Anderson's imagined communities of nationalism and reminds us that the boundaries of communities are managed and not set. Furthermore, we must remember computer-mediated communication is real and physical, since keys on a keyboard are manipulated to bring forth expressive text in the same way that some aspects of face-to-face communication are imagined. There is a physical manipulation present in the manipulation of computer keys to create computer-mediated communication. The question of community is less pertinent in this study than it is to online research. There is a clearly defined community of individuals allowed to manipulate the computer-aided dispatch system from the dispatcher’s perspective, since the system looks different in a police car or a fire rig.

Previous research on occupational folklore was used to structure an article on online gaming by Ben Gillis, a student at The University of Texas School of Law. In his study of online gaming *An Unexpected Font of Folklore: Online Gaming as Occupational Lore* Gillis examines the similarities between occupational lore and the structured community within *World of Warcraft*. The goal of the article is to draw a connection between the dedication players have to *World of Warcraft* and the “common principles of the American work ethic.”²⁷ While I do not necessarily agree with this connection Gillis uses analysis by occupational folklorists, most notably McCarl, to provide a structure for a reader to understand *World of Warcraft* and the elements of this culture which are of interest to folklorists. He uses the concept of “registers” to prove the social cohesion brought about by the language used in *World of Warcraft* both inside

²⁶ Skinner, “At the Electronic Evergreen,” 17.

²⁷ Gillis, “An Unexpected Font of Folklore,” 147.

and outside of the game.²⁸ Gillis draws a connection between the desire of a new player to learn the folk speech in *World of Warcraft* and McCarl's assertion that jargon in the workplace is used to form social cohesion and pass on knowledge.

Gillis also connects instructive stories about how not to act in the game to stories of failure often used to teach proper conduct in the "American workplace."²⁹ The personal narratives about failure in *World of Warcraft* resemble the cautionary stories told at a 9-1-1 call center analyzed later in this study. Although, in my opinion, Gillis's article falls short in several areas, its analysis of online communication and reliance on the idea of a cohesive American work ethic as a driving force behind player's actions, he does make some useful points. As he notes, "it is clear that while the mechanics of game play in *World of Warcraft* are controlled by the institution, the way players interact within the game is not. Similarly, vast quantities of *WoW*-related material have surfaced on the Internet-material that is folkloric, not institutional."³⁰

Computer-mediated communication, especially in the workplace, is a forum to analyze the intersections between vernacular and institutional communication conducted by employees through the use of computers. The structure of the platform used to conduct communication influences how employees use the computer as well as the structure of their messages. At a 9-1-1 call center social communication often occurs at the same time as work related communication. Analysis of how this computer-mediated communication occurs

²⁸ Ibid., 155.

²⁹ Ibid., 164.

³⁰ Ibid., 167.

impacts how we understand occupational folklore and also provides an understanding into the folkloristic analysis of online communication as well.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODS AND PERSPECTIVES

This thesis positions itself at the intersection of a branch of folklore research with a long history within the field as well as within the current movement in the discipline to incorporate interdisciplinary research for an understanding of computer-mediated communication. The foundations of this research in occupational folklore requires that we first examine research methodologies concerning the workplace, as they inform this study of a 9-1-1 call center.

Dangers of Representation

In his study of firefighter culture, Robert McCarl includes Captain David A. Ryan's (DCFD) response to the research McCarl conducted in *The District of Columbia Fire Fighters' Project*. Ryan writes, "It is my belief that fire fighters are not understood by those outside their community, nor do they understand themselves. The fiber of the profession is based on many misconceptions."³¹ As a member of the community, Ryan recognizes prevalent misconceptions and exoteric folklore about his community of firefighters. He states the desire to understand these misconceptions, both from within and outside of the community, was a major reason he supported McCarl's research. Ryan goes on to express his feelings about the representation of his community as put forth by McCarl's work. "Knowing how their stories do not seem to reflect a true image of themselves, I cannot help but look with a jaundiced eye at other folklore studies

³¹ McCarl, *The District of Columbia Fire Fighters' Project*, 31.

of other occupational groups.”³² Ryan sees the misrepresentation of the group he is a member of not only in the recording of the stories by McCarl but also in the way members of the group present themselves to McCarl. Within such studies of closely-knit occupational folklore there will always be an issue of representation. Clearly even with smaller groups, such as the focus of this thesis, no two members of the group see the occupation and its culture in the same way. Although McCarl approached this group of firefighters from the “shopfloor” his representation of them still did not meet the expectations of at least one of the members of this group. Consequently, I can only acknowledge that I present my research on my workplace from my own perspective. Although I have included what I hope to be accurate representations of my group of co-workers and their feedback on my analysis, I must assume there will be those who differ with my analysis, especially within a group like 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers who are known for being perfectionists and highly opinionated. Ultimately I cannot claim to speak for every dispatcher or calltaker and the breadth of their experiences, but still offer my analysis of the workplace culture, based on my emic perspective and the statements of others, presented in an ethical manner.

The insights from Ryan on McCarl's work demonstrate that misconceptions can be reached by researchers, even those who are closely aligned with the perspectives of the community they are studying. Furthermore, Ryan also notes that misconceptions about a community exist within the community as well. As we can see in Ryan's response to McCarl's work, there is always the danger that ethnographic products, and fieldwork in general, will not create a final product that members of the research group, or others, think is an

³² Ibid., 36.

accurate representation of the group. As a member of the community I am researching, I feel an obligation to make sure I am adequately reflecting this community. However, I also know that in part I can only present my perspective on the research I have conducted and can only hope that my presentation creates enough of an adequate representation, to facilitate a dialogue within the community.

Research Within Your Own Community

In this regard, Michel De Certeau introduces a larger concern for the field of ethnology and the writing of history: “The historian's goal, and the ethnologist's, is to outline the functioning of a cultural aggregate, to make its laws visible, to hear its silences, to structure a landscape that is nothing if it is not more than a simple reflection. But it would be wrong to think that these tools are neutral, or their gaze inert: nothing gives itself up, everything has to be seized, and the same interpretive violence can either create or destroy.”³³ Ethnology is engaging a larger field of assessment than ethnography in that it seeks to compare societies and ethnology seeks different conclusions. However, the concerns de Certeau brings up illustrate concerns in any field where a researcher is outlining a “cultural aggregate,” no matter how large or small. Here, where he suggests a violence in practices that draw larger conclusions about a group of people, he links this violence to the tools used to extract this information. While this is not a literal violence, the methods used to obtain and construct information about groups of people are never neutral. Such methods always

³³ de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, 135.

contain biases and concerns that we, as ethnographers, must attempt to be aware of and transparent about in the effort to frame our research.

Throughout this study, I have struggled to find the appropriate critical distance to study a workplace and a profession that requires a lot of emotional investment from an employee. The training process for this profession which is commonly said to “ruin your life for two years,” is only the beginning of the intense pressure and stress of this job. Although things become easier after the sixteen month training process, during which an employee can be fired at anytime and has no job security, there is still always the possibility that an employee would go to work and take a “bad call” that ruins their next couple days unexpectedly. Dispatching and calltaking changes the way those performing these jobs see the world. It restructures the world in terms of a different type of geography mapped onto a mental image of the city, a different perspective of the people in the city one must interact with through phone calls, and a variety of other perspectives that alter workers’ mentalities. I endeavored to find a way to document this community that is characterized by constant documentation (every call and transmission on the radio is recorded) and the constant criticism (from management, other coworkers, citizens and responders) that employees already endure. During the course of this project, I attempted to balance my perspective as an insider in the community with the position of a community which, as I mentioned earlier, is already so heavily documented but typically only in negative ways.

I looked to other researchers in the field of occupational folklore for perspectives. Many of them, if not insiders in the community, have close connections of some kind to the community they are studying. In general, many

folklorists have personal connections to the groups they are studying and perspectives on how to approach such a relationship are provided by a variety of folklore researchers. Jay Mechling, for example, discusses his perspective and methodology in his book *On My Honor*, which he has written from a perspective of a participant observer of the Boy Scouts. Mechling was active in a troop and has a previous scouting history, but is also conducting research within this group for his book. Mechling wrote this book for a general audience and by his own admission has created the events of a two-week camp from a composite of events that occurred at campouts over the course of several summers.³⁴ He supports this strategy with the following assertion: “My research and frequent conversations with people who have been Boy Scouts persuade me that both these things are true: there is a remarkable similarity in the Boy Scout experience across space and time, *and* the nature of the Boy Scout experience is considerably variable.”³⁵ I would argue the same is true of my research. There will be similarities in the experiences of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers across time and space, but the structure of specific workplaces will always influence the workers and result in variations.

Mechling has turned away from realist ethnography “which draws its narrative authority from the authority of positivistic science” and instead has “come to live comfortably with the notion that we really are more collaborators with our subjects than we are independent and objective observers.”³⁶ Mechling tells the reader he really tried to give back and offer interpretations to the

³⁴ Mechling, *On My Honor*, xxiii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

community as he was collecting data and collect their input.³⁷ He returned the information to the troop as a “sort of gift back to the troop.”³⁸ All of these factors influence the perspective Mechling took and he attempts a truthful examination of his place within the community, discussing the influences on his research and the effects of his reciprocity with his informants. Mechling does admit to having difficulty finding the “appropriate critical distance for writing about an institution that is so much a part of me,”³⁹ as a researcher who has also been involved in the scouting community for a number of years. Doing research within a community that the researcher is also a member of has overlapping ethical concerns common to all types of ethnography. Mechling’s project, his concerns and his methods of returning information to the group he studied are quite similar to how I structured my project. However, there are also concerns specific to my research among 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers that I note below.

My Perspective as a Researcher

There are drawbacks to being an insider within the community one studies. Notably, while making research observations, I must always be working. For example, while trying to document an interesting instance of fragmented conversation, my fieldnotes ended up looking like this in my notebook.

Coworker (Verbally to me): So I asked him if I could have his last lunch.

Me (Giving out a call over the radio): Guy inside says a couple of the guys who kicked in the door might have guns on them.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., xxiv.

Me (To myself but loud enough to be overheard): Well that is charming.

Coworker (Verbally to me): Inaudible

Me (To Coworker while turning back around): What did you say?

Coworker (To me):

The fieldnotes end suddenly at this point. I was attempting to record an example of fragmented narratives I found interesting at the time. I was talking to my coworker, who also had a trainee sitting with her that needed to be coached at a police dispatch terminal, and I also needed to talk to the officers monitoring my radios. During this exchange some element of this conversation interested me and I tried to write it down as soon as my hands were free after it happened. The fieldnotes leave off however, since the “guys who kicked in the door” did in fact have guns with them and had in fact committed a home invasion robbery. As I was trying to write the notes, this incident evolved into a SERT (Portland’s version of the SWAT team) callout and my radio traffic became very hectic as a result. After five hours of dispatching this SERT callout, I no longer remember the rest of the narrative I was trying to record or why I thought it was significant. It dawned on me later while writing this thesis that going to work while I was not actually being paid and sitting along with a coworker might have been an easier way to take notes. However, this would seem so strange to the community of co-workers that they might have come to worry about my sanity since many people don’t want to be on the operations floor even when they are being paid. Notably the intensely emotional relationship I, and many of my coworkers, have with this work can be problematic when the completion of this project relies on academic deadlines. Often, I do not want to think about work outside of the

workplace and spending time writing about work certainly doesn't help if I am frustrated with work or have taken an upsetting call.

While these are the logistical and emotional issues of working within this group, there are also other ethical concerns as well as issues concerning my perspective within the group. Because of the setup of the workplace, which will be discussed at length later in this study, in order to observe behaviors in the workplace I am always participating in these behaviors. Furthermore, when I am conducting interviews, since I am friendly with my interviewees, this usually means we are discussing incidents we would typically discuss on the workfloor. While this is positive and means my interviewees are comfortable with me, it also means I am a part of this research in ways a fieldworker might not always be. This has led to my concern that this project is too much focused on me, as a 9-1-1 dispatcher and as a fieldworker, as it is often difficult to get any distance from the workplace culture. Consequently the assistance of people outside of the workplace was necessary. Some were totally unaware of the work culture or some, like my partner or other coworker's partners, are exposed enough to the culture to understand it but also have some of that critical distance I sometimes wish I had as a fieldworker. I am indebted to their assistance and will note it in the body of this thesis just as I acknowledge Dr. Wojcik and Dr. Gilman's assistance in pointing out areas of description that, while clear to me, would be unclear to someone not at all familiar with a 9-1-1 call center. I am especially indebted to my partner, Adam Rothstein, who spent several hours helping me perform reflexive interviews on myself. He offered his perspective as someone who has been to the 9-1-1 call center and has heard stories from the workplace, but also is not totally embedded in the culture of the workplace. Without the

critical distance provided by others, parts of this work would be unintelligible to anyone who did not work at a 9-1-1 call center.

Despite the difficulties of this research topic, my role as an insider at a 9-1-1 call center puts me in a position to do research in a community it would otherwise be difficult to access. Karen Olson and Linda Shopes' article on their work involving oral history among a steelworking community in Dundalk, Maryland highlights an important dynamic in ethnographic research. They note that the people they interviewed perceived them, as researchers, to have "greater social power" and thus the ability to change the way the public views working class men and women. The authors state "thus we are lead to believe that our interviews are not so much records of facts that are more or less true—although they are that—but social texts, records of the social interaction situated within the context of class relations in larger society."⁴⁰ I don't believe anyone in my workplace perceives me to have greater social power because of my role as a researcher since my social standing within the workplace is determined by other factors. However, Olson and Shopes' statement makes a point that collected texts reflect larger social interactions. The quotations from my coworkers included in this document reflect a different relationship between me, as the collector, and my coworkers who were interviewed. Olson and Shopes' study helps us highlight the difference between the social relationship bounding the interviews, where I am perceived as a researcher, and the composite stories which were created as the result of observations during my normal role as a dispatcher. Even though I have a set status in the workplace based on my work performance, the

⁴⁰ Olson and Shopes, "Crossing Boundaries, Building Bridges," 198.

interviews are necessarily bounded differently than my observations since the frame of the interview impacts the nature of the materials collected.

William Wilson, a folklorist who was himself a Mormon missionary, notes in his study of the folklore of Mormon missionaries, “As I remembered my own years as a missionary in the mid-1950s and as I attempted to make sense of thousands of pages of interview data, I began to realize that if those in charge of organizing missionary work and supervising missionary activity would take pains to become more familiar with the lore (or traditional behaviors) of the missionaries, they might be able to structure the work in a way that would achieve the same results with fewer emotional costs.”⁴¹ Indeed, there are specific ethical concerns for researchers working within their own communities and Wilson demonstrates, often researchers of occupational folklore who have previous or current connections to the groups they study feel obligated to frame their research for the community’s benefit. In this case, while I am unsure at this time what direct applications my research will have in the workplace, I am interested in contributing to a positive reflection on a profession that is often overlooked and misunderstood, with the hope of more directly contributing in positive ways to this profession in the future.

Methods

My research was formulated around the perspective of participant observation. However, it was conducted during the course of my workday and therefore, my level of participation moves beyond what might be typical during fieldwork. I recorded my fieldnotes and observations after work hours. Over a

⁴¹ Wilson, “Dealing with Organizational Stress,” 271.

period of six weeks I observed storytelling events in the workplace. Obviously this observation process has also been impacted by my five years of employment (at the time of this writing) at the Bureau of Emergency Communications. Over the course of my career my role has changed from a calltaking trainee to a Senior Dispatcher. For this reason, I will also include references to personal observations and notes taken throughout my career in order to incorporate these earlier perspectives. In the course of my formal notetaking period in which I observed my co-workers, I noted my own response and methods of workplace evaluation and storytelling behaviors. At the same time I took general notes on my co-worker's behavior. In general the community is aware of my research. Since the workplace is divided into shifts I am able to ensure that workers on night shift are aware of my work, but this was not possible throughout all shifts on all days. Therefore, I also made a post on the union website that announced some of the steps of my research process to other workers.

As an observer in the workplace, I was mindful of the fact it was necessary to communicate boundaries with coworkers if they did not want to participate in my study. I used my personal experience in the workplace to formulate a basis for interviewing coworkers outside of work. I conducted interviews with coworkers outside of work hours. My interview questions focused on the employee's background, their perceived structure of the workplace, their experiences with storytelling and their relationship to stress and hierarchies in the workplace. All of the employees that I asked did choose to participate in my interviews.

Although most of the material gathered in interviews and presented here is discussed openly at the workplace, anonymity provides the employees who

participated in this study with protection from any type of retribution from management or other coworkers. Employees chose the pseudonyms used in this study, which accompany their descriptions. I recorded the interviews on a digital device and the digital data was stored separately from the coding of the names of the participants. Furthermore, no names of coworkers, responders, or citizens were purposely sought after in the interviews in order to make sure interviews did not contain any damaging information. These names and the specifics of the emergency incidents managed in the workplace are not included in this paper or the recording. Consequently, the privacy of the citizens who call for service from 9-1-1 is not violated. Furthermore, due to the often contentious relationship between 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers and management, at the completion of this thesis all audio recordings and fieldnotes have been destroyed. Should I decide to continue with this project, I will begin the collection of materials anew. I have taken steps to ensure the privacy of my coworkers, citizens and responders by choosing quotations that illustrate the points of my thesis and also do not put anyone's privacy in jeopardy. Any names of other coworkers brought up by interviewees have been excluded. This project focuses on research with eight interviewees. For issues of privacy, I will not be more specific as to where they fall in the seniority level. Their gender is reflected in their choice of pseudonym since all participants chose names that reflect the gender they identify with. Although an employee's position in seniority is often essential to understanding their role in the workplace the omission of this information must be an aspect of this study for privacy reasons. Ultimately the goal of this project is to analyze the internal communications of the 9-1-1 operations floor in order to better understand the implications of narratives in 9-1-1 call centers.

CHAPTER IV

DESCRIPTION OF THE WORKPLACE

Before the presentation and analysis of my fieldwork and interviews, it is necessary to start with a description of the 9-1-1 operations floor. In order to understand the influences of social hierarchies and the computer system used at the workplace, I begin with a description of the physical environment at the Bureau of Emergency Communications which will be referred to from here on as BOEC. After this, a brief presentation of the social hierarchies and social structure of the workplace follows. This will be examined in further detail later in the paper where the three different types of narratives told in the workplace are described. To make the general process of how work is structured at 9-1-1 clear to the reader, a detailed description of how a single call is processed from start to finish also will be presented.

The Physical Workplace

The Bureau of Emergency Communications is located adjacent to a city park and residential area and also by a major road and freeway in Portland. The building is surrounded by a fence and has a secure, gated parking area for employees. There is also an open parking lot and street parking for visitors who do not have keycard access to the secure parts of the building. The atmosphere of the building differs substantially between day shift and night shift. The ground floor of the building houses a radio shop whose employees work shifts resembling normal business hours. During the day there are also administrative offices on the ground floor and meetings that occur at the building with

employees who work for the city at other locations. There are a number of activities, trainings and meetings that occur at the building during the daytime. At night, after approximately 1900 (BOEC uses military time), the number of people at the building drops substantially. There are only twenty to thirty people in the building working their shifts at a time, which start and end every two hours throughout the day.

The operations floor, on the second level of the building, requires separate keycard entrance. When one walks in, the first thing a visitor would notice is the “fire pod” to the right. This is a semi-circle of seven desks. Two of the desks are devoted to the fire dispatchers, who have the primary responsibility for dispatching fire and medical responders. Up to four other dispatchers will sit at these terminals prepared to dispatch fires, which require a large amount of apparatus. The same types of terminals as used in the “fire pod” are used throughout the room. They consist of one desk, level with the keyboard, pens and paper. There is a second level behind the first where the monitors of the computers are attached. The terminals are designed to be worked at from a seated position and also from a standing position. Dispatch positions have six computer monitors positioned around them. Calltaking positions have four monitors positioned at the workstation. Both dispatch and calltaking positions have a CAD monitor, monitor screen used to access the internet, monitor to log into the phone system and monitor which displays the GPS coordinated location of callers who use cellphones. Dispatch positions have two extra monitors, one for the status screen to keep track of first responders and one monitor for the radio system. Successful multi-tasking involves coordinating visually between these screens and manipulating different functions in the computer systems.

Past the fire pod is the “supervisors pod,” which consists of three terminals. In front of this pod, there is a specially designated terminal for the day's schedule: the schedule bar. Scheduling is quite complicated since we move every two hours, from position to position, and there are so many different start and end times to shifts. At the schedule bar the employees also sign in on the time sheet, and can express some discontent about the make up of their schedule to the supervisors, or under their breath. The “police pod” is located past the schedule bar and is in the same semi-circle shape as the fire pod, adjacent to it, separated by the terminals. However, the police pod consists of four terminals, one for each dispatcher responsible for different geographic areas of Multnomah County. There are three extra positions that are often occupied by one or two coaches of later phase trainees. These positions are also used for tactical incidents and special events in the city of Portland like the Rose Festival. There is a fifth position on the outside edge of the “police pod” called service desk, responsible for processing specific types of police officer requests.

Behind the supervisors pod, in the back of the room, is the “calltaking pod.” This consists of fourteen terminals where calltakers and dispatchers sit when they are only processing phone calls. Some of the calltaking positions are grouped together in pairs so that coaches and trainees can sit together. When a trainee is in the early stage of training the coach sits right next to them. Later on, the coach will sit several terminals away and the calltaking positions are set up for the remote monitoring of trainees by coaches.

The entire operations floor is surrounded by a ring of administrative offices. This includes the supervisor’s office where discipline and performance reviews occur. There is also one row of windows covered with blinds. Typically

the room seems dark and employees don't have a sense of what the weather is outside, at least during the night shift. There is a light grey carpet on the floor and 15 foot high ceilings with acoustical tiles. There are no cubical walls and the different "pods" have a great deal of openness for workers to turn and talk to one another. This can facilitate discussion when there is free time to do so.

The Social Makeup of the Workplace

There are three separate job classifications "on the floor": calltakers, who have their own seniority levels, and police and fire dispatchers who have a separate seniority list. New employees spend six weeks in classroom academy, where they do several "sit-alongs" on the operations floor but are largely removed from the day-to-day functioning of 9-1-1. After completing six months of calltaking training with a coach, a further year of training is undertaken until an employee becomes certified at police dispatch. During this time the trainee is answering phones independently and being coached by a senior employee at police dispatch. Upon completing this phase of training the trainee becomes a police dispatcher, or a "real person," as my supervisor told me when I was certified. Reflecting the fact that when an employee is a trainee, some certified employees think trainees are "better seen and not heard" or "barely even human." Certifying at police dispatch generally indicates a step towards more general acceptance in the community that occurs one and a half years after one starts working at BOEC. After this, an employee will engage in three to five months of fire training to become a fire dispatcher. However, police dispatch is considered to be more difficult by the community and it is commonly accepted that an

employee will easily certify at fire dispatch if they are already certify at police dispatch.

A calltaker, or a “calltaker only,” as this job class is described on the floor, processes incoming calls. These calltakers either refer calls to other agencies or create calls in the computer to send to dispatch. This involves pulling up a “call mask” where the employee enters information such as the location of the incident, a brief description, the caller’s name and the caller’s phone number. Some calltakers attempted to learn to be dispatchers as part of their training, but were unsuccessful. At different points during the history of BOEC, employees who could not certify at police would be retained as calltakers or terminated upon their failure to complete police dispatch training, depending on the policy. This has varied throughout the history of the agency. Currently, “calltaker onlys” sign up for shifts and vacation separately from employees certified at dispatch. Nicky Bailey, a “calltaker only” who reviewed this section of the thesis, commented on my description. “I think that on an obvious level people who do dispatch have accomplished more and are on a more level peer wise with each other. But on the other hand most dispatchers prefer that to call taking so we are taking a load off for them.”⁴² While some members of the BOEC workforce might be critical of the work of employees who only answer the phones, these workers perform a task most workers who are dispatch certified dislike. They also take an enormous amount of pressure off of the call volume especially during rotations at the top of every odd hour. Even the most senior dispatchers still do take calls, although it is for a significantly shorter portion of their workday. Calltaker onlys do nothing else.

⁴² E-mail correspondence with Nicky Bailey.

A calltaker, no matter their classification, is responsible for managing a relationship between the calltaker and a caller. They also manage a relationship between the dispatchers at the different disciplines while taking into consideration the needs of the responders on the street while they format the text of the call for service. A dispatcher relays the information the calltaker conveys to the dispatcher in the computer over a radio to the responders on the street. The dispatcher, whether it is a fire or police dispatcher, manages the overall integrity and deployment of the resources on their radio channel. There are two to three supervisors on the floor who oversee what is occurring on the operations floor, send out pertinent pages when major incidents occur, and answer overflow 9-1-1 calls during spikes in call volume caused by major incidents or insufficient staffing.

The two disciplines—police and fire that has combined response with paramedics—are broken up into two sections of the room. In the “fire pod” coordination between dispatchers is typical. The fire dispatch environment is more cooperative than the police “side.” Fire dispatch is commonly referred to as “fire” and police dispatch as “police.” Unlike at fire dispatch, at police dispatch there is one dispatcher who is responsible for one geographic section of the city. Coordination between dispatchers in the “police pod” is more rare and usually only occurs when there is a major incident, like a traffic pursuit going through several jurisdictions, that requires coordination between dispatchers. This is not to say police dispatchers do not look for ways to help one another. However, the structure of the dispatch system on the police side of operations makes it much more difficult to assist another dispatcher. Coordination is built into the fire and

medical dispatch system and therefore it is required to work as a team of two or more people.

Workplace discipline is structured differently in police and fire dispatch. At police dispatch each individual is responsible for his or her own mistakes. However, at fire and medical dispatch, if you are sitting in the “fire pod” you are also responsible for the mistake of another employee in the “fire pod” even if you were not even aware it was occurring. Therefore, at police dispatch one employee will take the blame for an error and at fire dispatch the whole team working in the “fire pod” is responsible for an error even if they are not directly involved in causing it. Police dispatch is more free form and one is often called upon to paraphrase “on the air.” At police dispatch there are many stylistic differences in how employees give out information and there are fewer Standard Operating Procedures regulating the order in which information is given out at police dispatch. Consequently, Multnomah County police dispatch has a reputation for being very lax in comparison to other dispatch centers in similar-sized cities and there is room for officer input in the dispatch exchange. This can be beneficial but also lead to officers questioning calls in ways that would not be tolerated at other centers. On the other hand, fire dispatch is very stringent in its wording and there is little to no room for commentary from the crews.

The process of answering a 9-1-1 phone call at calltaking and dispatching it will be discussed further in the next section where I will describe the pathway a 9-1-1 phone call takes through the dispatch center. The different classifications of employees interact with each other on the boundaries of call processing, specifically when a call is sent to the dispatcher. Dispatchers might question a calltaker's priority, how fast and how many responders get set to a call, or a

calltaker's text, which is confusing or badly worded. Calltakers might also question a dispatcher who interrogates them about the wording in the text of their call too frequently when the calltaker's text is actually clear. Supervisors provide oversight to the entire process of calltaking and dispatching at the call center. However, they usually do not monitor individual phone calls unless the calltaker has a question. They will monitor the radio traffic on police radios, especially when there is a "hot" incident, and they will also monitor large fire incidents.

The hierarchies of the workplace create an officially structured environment where certain employees have the ability to question other employee's work because of the workflow. For example, a dispatcher can question an employee who is processing a 9-1-1 call who is "calltaker only." The flow of questions typically stems from dispatch and is directed at calltakers regardless of the calltaker's status in the workplace. A newly certified police dispatcher can also question a senior dispatcher who is dispatching fire and sends the police dispatcher a badly worded request for police. Employees who are certified beyond phones move every two hours. They move between the different police radio channels, the two fire radio channels, calltaking and other specialize positions. Therefore the dynamics of questions and control over resources is always changing. Although some workplace behavior falls under what is called "style" some decisions are cut and dry. Inevitably there is no one, even the supervisors, who are above reproach and criticism.⁴³

⁴³ Thank you to Julie for assistance with this section.

How a Call Is Processed from Start to Finish

The typical 9-1-1 call for service starts with a citizen on the street using a landline or cell phone to dial 9-1-1 for service. There are other ways a call can be processed through the dispatch center, such as third hand information to a crisis line or an officer coming across a problem on the street and calling it in on the radio, but for the purposes of this description we will follow a call that originates with a citizen on the street. After dialing 9-1-1 the citizen hears a message which says "Portland 9-1-1. If this is an emergency say 9-1-1 after the beep or press any key on your phone at anytime." This is specifically designed to cut down on the number of "butt dialers" or people who accidentally dial 9-1-1 on their cellphones. The call starts with a calltaker, who receives information about the caller's location and the caller's phone number on a small screen. If the caller is calling from a landline, the calltaker gets the caller's exact address and phone number. If the caller is calling from a cellphone the calltaker gets an approximate location, which is triangulated with a certain exact distance and displayed to the calltaker on a map, and the phone number the citizen is calling from. There are also 9-1-1-only cell phones, which cannot be called back since they have been deactivated, and voice-over-internet-protocol (VOIP) which might not show the callers exact location and operator assisted calls. However, landline and cell phone calls make up the majority of the calls for service.

After receiving the call, the calltaker begins to question the caller about the emergency. If it is a non-emergency problem the caller is given a recording of the non-emergency number so the caller can be referred to the correct line for service. The calltaker's main responsibility is to ensure that the right type of help—police, fire or medical--goes to the correct address or street intersection. In order to

ensure this, calltakers and dispatchers spend a lot of time in training and throughout their career learning the geography of the county. Typically a calltaker might start by determining if the call is for police, fire or medical, or a combined call for service that requires two or more disciplines. Their methods of questioning are determined by the type of call being processed. For medical and fire, triage guides dictate the questions the calltaker asks. For police there are required questions but these vary based on the type of call. For example, a calltaker would always ask, "are there any weapons" on a disturbance, but would not ask this question on a noise complaint. In general this demonstrates a difference between police calls and police dispatching in general, and medical and fire calltaking and dispatching. Police is more free form and leaves more to the dispatcher or calltaker's discretion. Medical and fire are more structured. This is representative of the inherent differences in these two types of calltaking and dispatching, since police work typically has more variables at least from a dispatch perspective than fire and medical. If the call is a combined call for service, such as a shooting, the calltaker will balance the medical questioning and triage information with the police questioning and gathering information about the suspect.

Based on the type of call, there are required times for the calltaker to have a call be sent to dispatch. Calltakers process the call on the phone and put information into a "mask" in CAD. When the calltaker hits enter, after putting in a location and other essential information, the call for service is transmitted through CAD to the correct dispatcher. Often this means part of the information, such as location and a brief description of the nature of the problem, is included in the start of the call. Further information, such as suspect direction of travel or

additional medical information, will be collected by the calltaker and added to the call when the call is already being dispatched. At dispatch, the dispatcher picks the appropriate units and sends them to the location of the problem. At police, this means the dispatcher is using the police unit responsible for that specific geographic area and the one the dispatcher thinks is closest for cover based on geography and GPS location. For fire and medical, the closest unit is determined by the computer based on the fire management area and GPS location for the ambulances.

The dispatcher relays all pertinent information in the call to the responders over the radio. The dispatcher also answers any questions the responders have and coordinates with other dispatchers and supervisors to deal with responder's requests for information. A dispatcher also responds to requests from responders on the street for what is called self-initiated activity. All of these requests are processed over the same radios used to send responders to locations where citizens have requested them. On the police side of dispatch self-initiated activity is more prevalent. Officers stop people and cars and come across crime more often than fire responders come across fires or have walk-in patients to their fire stations. However, while responders are enroute and on scene at calls that begin with citizen phone calls, a dispatcher manages the responders' status by accurately recording the location where responders are.

The dispatcher continues to manage questions about the call and requests for additional resources while the responder is on scene of the call. More often than not, dispatchers and calltakers do not know the outcomes of the calls they are involved in processing, unless responders make a note of what occurred while they are on scene before they leave an incident. Although this may happen,

it is not typical. On police calls, for instance, it would depend on the responding officer's notes. Some have a habit of leaving copious notes in the text of calls they respond to and some typically leave short notes of one to two sentences. On fire and medical calls no notes are made, but if the call is noteworthy there are formal channels a dispatcher or calltaker can go through to obtain information about the call. There are also informal social channels used to gain information about the outcomes of calls and some responders will answer direct text messages from dispatchers or calltakers in the Computer Aided Dispatch system when they request further information about the outcome of calls.

CHAPTER V

STORYTELLING AT BOEC

Calltakers, dispatchers and supervisors all engage in storytelling on the operations floor. The following is an example of a humorous story one senior dispatcher recounts even though it has been several years since she processed the call on phones.

Mabel: Ok so she goes, she says [makes sniveling noise] 'I'm so afraid.' [laughter] 'What happened?' 'My grandpa came home [imitates crying noises] and he tried to start a fight with my mom and he is really drunk and then he left and I'm afraid if he comes across anyone on the street he is going to get in a fight with them.' And I go [feigning sounding irritated] 'ok' and I go 'do you have any idea where he might have gone?' 'Well I think he went back to the tavern to get his arms.' [laughter from group and storyteller].

Megan: What?

Mabel: 'He doesn't have any arms and he takes them off when he drinks.' [laughter] And so the cop gets to the bar and enters a note in the call 'already here got his arms and left.'

Megan: Oh my god.⁴⁴

Mabel is widely accepted to be one of the best storytellers at BOEC and her skill is recognized across shifts and classification boundaries. The punch line of this story, "well I think he went back to the tavern to get his arms," is humorous even if you are not a 9-1-1 dispatcher and calltaker. However, when she imitates the caller and says, "I am scared" the boisterous laughter which follows this part of the narrative would not be looked upon as appropriate outside of the company of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers. Mabel is not only known for her skill at storytelling but also her skill as a dispatcher and the large number of strange and

⁴⁴ Personal Interview with Mabel.

traumatic calls she has experienced in the workplace. This story is representative of a number of calls for service she has encountered in her extensive experience and the range of stories that have become “re-tellable.”

Storytelling serves a variety of functions in high stress environments. At a 9-1-1 call center each type of story I have identified can serve different functions depending on the setting in which it is told. Looking to the work of other folklorists we can examine how they have approached the functions of stories in other traumatic or high stress settings. In folklorist Eleanor Wachs' book on crime-victim stories she identifies three functions of crime-victim narratives.⁴⁵ She concludes her chapter on the functions of such narratives by stating, “whether implicitly or explicitly, tellers impart a form of folk knowledge-street smarts. In addition, these stories teach about the dangers of the urban world. They function as a psychological safety valve, permitting tellers and victims to objectify their experiences by finding some humor in them.”⁴⁶ By telling these stories Wachs claims that victims “can start to regain their sense of autonomy, so often robbed from them during victimization.”⁴⁷ Wachs draws several conclusions about the function of crime victim narratives, including the ones listed above. Wachs’ identified three functions of crime victim’s narratives. They are cautionary, teach street smarts and are therapeutic. She also notes lessons that crime victim’s narratives transmit such as avoiding enclosed spaces. However, we might consider that not all crime-victim’s narratives serve the same functions in all storytelling settings.

⁴⁵ Wachs, *Crime-Victim Stories*, 62.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Rather than focusing on the functions of narratives at a 9-1-1 call center, and then approaching the narratives, I have identified three types of narratives and examine some of the possible interpretations of these narratives. The first of these types of narratives is cautionary stories, and we will see the can be overlap between the three types of stories I discuss. Noticeable genres of 9-1-1 work narratives are cautionary stories, first-time stories and venting sessions. Each of these types of stories functions to transmit knowledge about work, while acting as a safety-valve, similar to the use of crime victim's narratives. While these three narratives are types of stories that are told, they are more representative of a type of event rather than serving a specific function overall. The organization of the workplace, both in the physical realm and the structure of the computer-aided dispatch system, facilitates and influences the form and expression of narratives in the workplace. Therefore, the designation of these three types of narrative facilitates this discussion. However when I think about these stories and how they are told from my perspective as a worker and not a researcher, there is always fluidity between them. The function of the story is not inherent to the narrative. The structure of the storytelling session, which is fluid because of the structure of the workplace, impacts the function of the story.

In *Land of the Millrats*, Richard Dorson also discusses crime victim narratives that “the attacked person or persons and the witnesses disseminate to their families and friends a particular account of the chilling episode, which the listeners may then repeat at second-hand within their own crimelore repertoires. One crime-tale triggers another, in the universal process of storytelling, and the actual events mingle with the embroidered and the apocryphal to form a pool of

frightening stories.”⁴⁸ Dorson argues that in his examination of urban folklore in the heavily industrial Calumet region of the United States, crime-tales “fill the gap left by the decline of scary ghost and horror legends.”⁴⁹ Although I am not sure if his analysis is correct, since arguably there are similar but also slightly different functions for either type of narrative, there are nonetheless similarities among these crime victims tales and the stories 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers tell. Stories at a 9-1-1 dispatch center can function as safety-valves and help employees work through trauma. They also can impart knowledge to other employees which is not necessarily communication through the formal channels of the institution. While similarities with previous narratives and occupational folklore in general, it is necessary to examine the peculiar circumstance of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers in order to understand how narratives not only reflect the nature of the profession, from dealing with callers angry about a loud party next door to actual traumatic events like shootings, but also the structure of the workplace. The social hierarchy impacts when, where, and under what circumstances stories are told. After this analysis, which focuses on the aforementioned three types of narratives, we will also see that the structure of the computer-aided dispatch system used to conduct the work in the workplace also impacts how stories are told.

Storytelling and Tensions in the Workplace

Storytelling has a significant influence within the 9-1-1 call center. It manages boundaries between employees, boundaries created by seniority, skill

⁴⁸Dorson, *Land of the Millrats*, 216.

⁴⁹Ibid., 231.

and other social factors in the workplace. It also manages the boundaries between 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers and the pressures they face from responders, management, operations floor supervisors and callers. In addition, narrating furthers the goals of a social hierarchy. This hierarchy is sometimes related to seniority, the seniority list based on hiring date, but also managed by employee's perceptions of each other's work quality and general behavior in the workplace. At BOEC, narratives grow out of the tensions and the need to maintain a certain structure of work quality that is socially maintained rather than always mandated by management's idea of quality work. While there are strict guidelines maintaining how much of the work is done, for example what questions you ask on a certain type of call, often the culture of the operations floor means some work is done outside these boundaries. Priorities assigned to calls are one example of this. Often, Standard Operating Procedures might call for a priority-two response on a welfare check which would involve, for example, a police officer responding to a residence to check on a resident with five newspapers stacked on the front porch or a woman lying face down at an intersection on the street. A priority welfare check means two officers responding lights and sirens. Often the culture of the floor is to make these priority-four, one officer with no lights and no sirens. Priorities on calls are a space where calltakers and dispatchers use their skills and experience to choose how first responders respond to a specific incident. Some call types are straight forward, but in police calltaking especially, some are not. Dispatcher and calltaker discretion and call wording make-up a larger portion of decisions made about calls than some first responders imagine.

However, after I initially used this example in a first draft of this thesis, priority four calls became a very complicated issue at the workplace. Numerous narratives, typically shared in venting sessions have been devoted to the discussion of priority four calls. These calls represent a grey area and consequently an area of dispatcher discretion. All of the police precincts and all of the workshifts—days, afternoon and nights—have varying cultures. Within each of these shifts, and among different sergeants, there were different ideas about how dispatchers should handle these types of calls. Essentially a dispatcher would have to cater to the views and whims of individuals when dealing with these types of calls. Eventually the discussion about these types of calls, and complaints from sergeants, became an overwhelming problem at work and at the time of the writing of this thesis, this continues to be an issue under discussion between management and dispatchers and calltakers. Ultimately this is a question about a dispatcher’s skill and authority when making a determination about a response to a certain situation.

This is one example of a larger issue, which is ultimately a policy issue within BOEC and within the Portland Police Bureau, which consequently elicited numerous narratives from individuals. Often these would be venting sessions where several dispatchers discussed their experiences with the sergeants who complained the most about how priority four calls were being handled. This issue also resulted in cautionary stories, where a coach might try and illustrate an experience they once had when a sergeant thought they mishandled the dispatching, or holding, of a priority four call. First-time stories might be slightly less relevant, but as this issue became more contentious over a period of six months a dispatcher might, for example, be able to share the first-time they we

screamed at on the radio by an angry sergeant about one of these calls. Examining three types of narratives in a 9-1-1 call center illustrates how these narratives reflect and maintain the workplace structure and hierarchy, as it is generated by employees on the operations floor, while also challenging institutional controls on workplace performance by those who are not dispatchers or calltakers, including management and partner agencies.

The example of priority four calls demonstrates a confrontational situation with partner agencies and also involved management's handling of this situation. However, similar frustrations exist between job classifications on the operations floor as well. This is common to many occupations where the concerns of one job classification might not overlap with the concerns of a related job classification in the same workplace. In his study of kitchens, Gary Alan Fine notes that cooks are positioned in between servers, whose goal it is to keep customers happy with quick service of food, and management who wants to keep costs down by employing the smallest number of cooks possible.⁵⁰ Fine states "as a consequence, cooks operate under heavy constraints and feel a lack of autonomy, leading to occupational dissatisfaction. This lack is compounded by the hierarchy within the kitchen" where a cook is often under the control of a superior, a chef, within the kitchen itself. This is similar to the experience of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers and certainly many other professions as well including professions examined by other folklorists such as flight attendants and missionaries. Ultimately tensions between single individuals, certain job classification, workers on certain shifts, operations floor supervisors, office management and partner agencies can elicit and produce narrative events. For example, one employee

⁵⁰ Fine, *Kitchens*, 20.

might argue with another employee whose work ethic is not what it should be or a group of calltaker-only employees might complain about a dispatcher who asks too many questions about their calls. Night shift workers may complain about day shift always being late to start work. A certain supervisor on the operations floor always notifies employees too late in their shift they are ordered over for two hours and must work two hours of overtime. Management often doesn't understand the needs of the operations floor and partner agencies do not understand how the work of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers is structured so they frequently get frustrated with the information in our calls. There is a telescopic quality of inclusiveness, from the individual outwards to the bureau as a whole, which includes certain individuals based on the level of tension. Management might be included with "us" when the existing tension is with police, and it might only include a single individual in the case of two person conflicts. When considering narratives in the workplace, this perceived level of cohesion is important to consider in each narrative event.

Why 9-1-1 Dispatchers and Calltakers Share Stories at Work

As one interviewee described to me, she more frequently shares stories with coworkers than with non-BOEC employees: "I do feel that I share them more often with other employees. I feel like they will understand it more than people who don't work there."⁵¹ Another coworker, Ken Norby echoes the same sentiment, stating: "I talk about work more often with . . . other people who work there because it is more easily relatable, I think. And often by the time I am off of work I will forget . . . but I do talk about some calls outside of work if they are

⁵¹ Interview with Anonymous co-worker.

interesting.”⁵² In both of these statements an understanding of the workplace environment seems to be one of the key factors for sharing such stories within the workplace. When asked more about to whom he tells stories to outside of work Ken Norby said “When people ask, when they know where you work, people generally want to know, which is natural, ‘cause they know we hear some crazy shit.”⁵³ However, many people who do not work in related fields will often be upset by such stories. My dialogue with Ken continued when I responded. “If you tell stories to people outside of work they look at you like you are a monster.” This led him to explain further: “Or it sounds petty sometimes, the commentary you might give on it. It is better outside of work to tell the cautionary ones or the ones like the raccoon story which are interesting. That is what people want to hear anyways.”⁵⁴ A 9-1-1 dispatcher or calltaker usually learns that if they respond truthfully to the questions asked by an outsider “What is the worst call you have ever taken?” that perhaps a truthful answer was not the best course of action, as outsiders generally respond with extreme discomfort or horror. I have personally never been able to understand what answer someone is seeking when they ask this question, but invariably the answer one gives is more disturbing to the inquirer than they were expecting. Usually telling a story to someone who is not a coworker, or in a related field who has some foundation for understanding, involves performing the sort of story the outsider “might want to hear.”

9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers prefer to share their stories with coworkers because there is an implication of mutual understanding. The physical

⁵² Interview Ken Norby

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

layout of the workplace also encourages storytelling among employees of the same job classification. Police dispatchers sit next to each other in the same “police pod.” If there are not a lot of calls to dispatch, the slow time gives dispatchers a chance to talk to one another and share narratives. Calltakers also sit in the same pod and can talk to one another. However, they have a choice where they sit, while dispatchers must sit at preassigned positions when they dispatch. Therefore calltakers might sit next to one another based on a social relationship while dispatchers must sit next to one another based on preassigned positions. Employees who just answer the phones sit at the same position for their entire ten or twelve hour shift. This creates a different environment for storytelling than dispatch, since dispatchers move every two hours.

Structure of the Workplace and Conversation

Folklorist Camilla Collins' dissertation on a hosiery mill contains a similar description of the dynamics of the workplace. “Sains' employees utilize many types of situations for talking to each other. Generally, the arrangement of their work areas determines the extent of their participation and the type of the conversational situation. Chain conversation occurs in the work areas because the employees work adjacent to each other.”⁵⁵ She also describes another form of conversation in this workplace. “Enroute conversation takes place when an employee leaves the individual work space to go to another area in the department. They leave their work space, for example, to go to the bathroom, water fountain, or to the storage bins. Along the way, the employee stops to talk

⁵⁵ Collins, “Twenty-Four to a Dozen: Occupational Folklore in a Hosiery Mill”, 73.

to others in passing. Such enroute conversation is usually with someone in the same department or work area who is not an immediate link in chain conversations.”⁵⁶ A similar situation occurs at BOEC. Employees who often work next to each other in the “police pod” or “fire pod” share stories. If an employee is friends with a calltaker only, that employee might stop and talk to the calltaker while enroute to the bathroom at the back corner of the operations floor. Sharing of narratives is also impacted by social relationships. For example, if one of the dispatchers in the “police pod” is a training team, some dispatchers have an expectation that the trainee will not participate in the discussion occurring between certified dispatchers. The trainee, based on circumstances, would be expected to just sit and listen. However, in general the proximity of work stations to one another facilitates conversation if the work flow allows for it.

Sociologist William Foote Whyte provides a description of one relationship boundary upon which friction developed in the kitchen in his study of restaurants. He describes a relationship between “countermen” and waitresses, where the “countermen” would purposefully slow down or turn away from the counter when waitresses were putting pressure on them for increased speed. “While this defensive maneuver provided the men with some emotional satisfaction, it slowed down the service, increased the frustration of the waitresses, and thus built up tensions to be released in larger explosions later.”⁵⁷ All workplaces have boundaries between workers, customers, bosses or others along which friction builds. In *Human Relations in the Restaurant Industry* Whyte

⁵⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁷ Whyte, *Men at Work*, 129.

includes a lengthy description of formal and informal hierarchies within a restaurant workplace. Along with other folklorists, like Jack Santino, he recognizes the impact of the dynamics created between a worker and customers in the workplace. Gary Alan Fine also studied restaurant work and argues that play in the workplace is socially situated and is linked to periods of rest or lulls in work activities. In a discussion of kitchens, he notices that play in the workplace fills empty space and allows for a release that actually enhances workplace production, even though some play can be detrimental to workplace goals in certain situations.⁵⁸ There are frictions between different job groups and job classes, frictions within the collective workforce which manage the hierarchies and moments of ludic release within the workplace. This characterizes the experiences of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers and similar jobs that have cohesive social structures. There are obviously many types of work with social structures and boundaries that do not resemble these workplace structures.

While many employees will limit their storytelling to work because they do not want to “take work home with them” there are also social boundaries within the workplace along which social tensions rise and impact the act of storytelling. Elements unique to working at a 9-1-1 call center are reflected in narratives, just as specific aspects of any occupational group is reflected in the occupational lore, as has been demonstrated by folklorists. At 9-1-1 call centers, three of the most noticeable types of narratives are cautionary stories, first-time stories, and venting sessions. Single narratives told during venting sessions are often exchanged in groups of three or more people and elicit similar tales from

⁵⁸ Fine, “Letting off Steam?,” 121.

other dispatchers and calltakers in the group. We have seen how and why communication occurs in the workplace and how it is facilitated. In this next section I examine in detail these three types of narratives that occur in the workplace and illustrate their significance. Then I discuss four themes in workplace communication, themes which are not meant to be exhaustive but that illustrate the concerns of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers.

CHAPTER VI

THREE TYPES OF STORIES TOLD AT A 9-1-1 CALL CENTER

Before I begin an analysis of three types of narratives identified at BOEC, I want to be clear that these are not the only types of narratives that exist at a 9-1-1 call center or that my description of them illustrates the only ways such narratives can occur. Furthermore, some of these story types certainly might be told by workers in allied disciplines, like police officers, or friends who are not 9-1-1 dispatchers or calltakers. For example, when telling a story to a police officer there might be an assumption of understanding that is actually not present since many officers might not be aware of the actual process of handling a 9-1-1 call. The procedure of telling a story to a citizen might be frustrating because of the level of description that would be required and because of their lack of familiarity with the vernacular terminology or jargon. These stories are types of stories and the surroundings and structure of the storytelling event is what creates the various types of stories I examine in this thesis. Therefore categorization has been applied for analysis with the understanding that a reader will see how these story types can transgress these boundaries. In this section, I rely on stories and events shared in interviews and my observations from fieldnotes in the workplace. Later in this thesis I analyze how these storytelling events occur multi-modally on the operations floor. Therefore, we might approach the following section as an illustration of a type of story told on the operations floor. In chapter eight I examine the multi-modal storytelling events further to draw more detailed conclusions about how stories are told at this 9-1-1 call center.

Regardless of the narrative or the circumstance in which it is told, there is knowledge of communicative competence when telling a story to another dispatcher or calltaker. As such, the analysis of these narrative events has applications to other types of narrative events at a 9-1-1 call center. I examine first-time stories, such as when an employee recounts the first time they experienced a certain call or circumstance, venting sessions, which allow for the cathartic expression of emotions, and cautionary stories, which have lessons to pass on to other employees. The examples discussed here illustrate narratives told both multi-modally and in one medium.

The function of these stories is not inherent to the narrative type I have categorized. As noted, the structure of the storytelling session, which is fluid because of the structure of the workplace, impacts the function of the story. I identified these three specific types of stories three and a half years ago soon after I completed police dispatch training. This was also at the time I began my M.A. work in the Folklore program, while I was relatively new at being a police dispatcher. Thus it is unclear to me whether these are categories I noticed as a 9-1-1 dispatcher or as a folklorist. However, three coworkers who attended a feedback meeting with me agreed with my classifications. As folklorist Robert Georges notes, similarities in storytelling events “enable member of a given society to group certain storytelling events together.”⁵⁹ Thus, I would argue, classifying narratives into these three types appears to be a reasonable decision both as a folklorist and as a member of the community I am studying.

⁵⁹ Georges, “Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events,” 319.

First-time Stories

The phenomenon of first-time stories is significant and can be applied to a great number of scenarios such as a calltaker's first CPR call, a dispatcher's first traffic pursuit, and many other bounded events. These stories are often told in the context of story swapping. The swapping of stories generally starts when one employee relates a story. Other employees feel the need to embellish upon it or "one-up" the other employee or they might want to share related stories. Relative equals usually share first-time stories and whether this occurs among trainees or more senior employees depends on the setting. However, these stories are most noticeable among trainees. The majority of the first-time stories I recorded were collected during my time as a trainee and therefore cannot be used in this thesis because of IRB restrictions. However, there are currently a number of trainees at my workplace and I am able to observe them engaging in this type of story swapping. Since the training process can last up to two years, this type of storytelling does stay relevant through a longer time period in this particular occupation than in many others. First-time stories also become relevant once more when an employee becomes a coach. At this point, the first-time stories become instructive and impress the importance of a certain skill on a less senior employee. These types of stories are also shared in other contexts throughout an employee's career. An employee might try to impress the skill of another employee upon another employee who is listening. More senior dispatchers in my seniority block, who actually don't have that much seniority overall but do on night shift, will reminisce on first-time stories from time-to-time. However, these stories are typically told between trainees, in order to communicate shared experiences, or to trainees by coaches to impart a lesson.

An example of my own experience, shared during a self-interview, illustrates the negative feelings associated with some first-time stories. In this case, and in the trauma section later in this thesis, I choose to use my own narratives about negative experiences instead of those of other employees. Although others did share these experiences in interviews, I feel more comfortable using my own experiences in print in part because my observations seem to indicate that my own experiences are similar to other employees', or at least the employees I interviewed. The following narrative that I told is an example of a first-time story elicited by the question "what was the first time that you felt that you might fail in doing something, either at calltaking or dispatch, while it was going on and were truly concerned by what the consequences would be?"

I mean I guess the first time I really had an incident where the consequences were like really bad was that guy in the gorge . . . where I mean, up until then I was like if I like use common sense it will always work out you know. If I think about something and use common sense, but in that case I didn't know what to do so I asked a supervisor . . . and like . . . you know they told me what to do and it was wrong 'cause that guy was lying in a mangled heap at the bottom of that cliff . . . well whatever, you know how fucked up that incident was. It is like that is the first time where . . . even if we do everything right and we like follow S.O.P [Standard Operation Procedure] and we follow what I think would be appropriate it is still not going to work out alright all the time. So that was the first time where I really felt responsible for like a negative outcome even though I wasn't really responsible for that negative outcome and that guy would have died anyways or like was dead, I mean he was like lying there kinda of not dead for awhile, but basically dead. I don't know . . . you know what happened.⁶⁰

First-time stories have significance to the narrator because certain stories fit into this categorization and exemplify the worst possible scenario on the job.

Therefore these stories have become an important way for the narrator to express

⁶⁰ Self-reflexive interview with Megan Rothstein.

their relationship with an upsetting event with the goal of finding some meaning in it and sharing it with others. This story was recorded shortly after I was no longer a trainee and, as I stated above, the regularity of these types of stories being shared diminishes the longer an employee is “out” of training.

In the excerpt above, it is clear I expect understanding from my partner who is listening to my description. He has enough experience with my workplace, and in addition to hearing stories he has also participated in sit-alongs, and I know he is culturally competent in 9-1-1 workplace experiences and vernacular. Phrases such as “you know what happened” illustrate he knows about the incident but also that he knows what happened on a larger level. He knows there was nothing to be done in this situation to change the outcome. This story also has a lesson, since sometimes there is nothing you can do as a calltaker or dispatcher to influence the outcome of a call. A question about what could have been done better or differently is always in a 9-1-1 calltaker or dispatcher’s mind at the end of an upsetting call. Narratives deal with this frustration but typically demonstrate a lesson learned from the negative experience. I have told this story to trainees before and to other coworkers when we discuss the process of becoming a certified 9-1-1 dispatcher or calltaker.

I noticed similarities between how new 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers share first-time stories and Cornelia Cody’s analysis of storytelling in her article *Only in New York*. Cody explains why she focused on new New Yorkers: “but transplanted New Yorkers . . . are particularly attuned to the spectacle of the city, and they become part of it by crafting their experiences into personal narratives that capture its pace and its paradoxes. Their stories initiate newer transplants, imparting “street smarts” and making sense of the city’s chaos and over-

stimulation.”⁶¹ Newcomers to extreme experiences, and the frequent experiences with crime many of these New York narratives describe on can be categorized as extreme, experience the event differently than a seasoned New Yorker. As Cody notes, these newcomers will narrate about those events differently than more seasoned New Yorkers. In the same way, the impact of an extreme call or a new call is more pronounced for a trainee.

Multi-modal narratives encapsulate about half of the narrative events occurring at a 9-1-1 call center based on my observations. In the case of 9-1-1 calltakers, they should not even be performing a narrative multi-modally when they are first in calltaking training. It is not until they are certified at phones that they should be texting or messaging for personal reasons in the Computer Aided Dispatch system. However, learning to communicate multi-modally, and knowing when and what not to perform in certain mediums, is part of fitting into the culture of the operations floor. Learning what events are significant enough to narrate about also occurs during the training process. Cody quotes extensively from the narratives she collected and uses them to demonstrate the different characteristic of New Yorkerness and how exhibiting these indicates you have become a New Yorker. Many transplants or visitors to the city lack or fail to demonstrate the characteristics in their narratives. She concludes observes that New Yorkers re-establish control of their physical environment and also feel superior because they can laugh at difficult experiences outside of the norms most people typically encounter. This observation relates to my discussion of dark humor later in this thesis, since dark humor functions as an element of 9-1-1

⁶¹ Cody, “Only in New York,” 220.

dispatcher and calltaker's narratives.⁶² In the case of these narratives about New York, the eventual goal is to be able to narrate competently like a New Yorker. The narrator demonstrates his or her skill, and therefore the underlying characteristics, that convey how a New Yorker should feel about dangerous experiences. For 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers this is also the case. Eventually the types of significant or shocking events that are told as first-time stories and are so commonly shared among trainees become less and less frequent as an employee experiences more and more calls. However there are some calltypes which are so rarely seen, such as an AIRRIV (airplane crashing into a river) that a senior dispatcher would most likely have a first-time story for these calls.

Many calltakers have a traumatic first-time story for CPR because most people who have CPR preformed on them die despite of the procedure when the CPR instructions are being given over the phone. This increases the possibility the first time a calltaker instructs the caller in CPR he or she will not have a good outcome. This often becomes a story calltakers will share with each other during their training process. During classroom training, trainees will often talk about whether or not they have had a certain type of call yet. They recount the first-time they had an experience with a certain type of incident like a traffic pursuit, or a house fire, or a murder.

When more senior employees, such as a coach, share their first experience about a certain type of incident these narratives are significant for two reasons. The stories pass on "street smarts," as many researchers have noted about certain genres of storytelling and as Cody specifically noted about New Yorker's stories. As an example, the first-time stories a coach tells to a trainee might illustrate

⁶² Ibid., 241.

some obstacle the coach had to overcome. These stories might exhibit the following structure: “The first time I had a traffic pursuit, my headset failed. So I had to fix that before I could even deal with the radio traffic. I was two steps behind from the start of it.” Or, the story might illustrate a specific answer to a question a trainee asked, providing information about how to deal with a problem with a clearly illustrated lesson for the trainee. First-time stories might also answer a question and the coach might not specifically draw out the lesson a trainee should learn from the story. In the case of first-time stories, one of the parties engaged in the story is frequently a trainee. This type of story, illustrated by the excerpt from an interview above, can overlap with different types of storytelling events like venting sessions and cautionary stories. My narrative has aspects of a first-time story and a cautionary story in that it explains my first experience with a very negative outcome, that I couldn’t control, and also supports cautionary stories told by other dispatchers that encourage other employees not to disregard caller’s statements. However, other examples of these first time stories are significant because they often exhibit the process of enculturation at BOEC. An employee learns to tell a story like a dispatcher or calltaker as there are different types and styles of stories. Employees, especially trainees, also tell these stories to deal with the new experiences they encounter. These experiences eventually become so commonplace that first-time stories become instructive.

Venting Sessions

Stories describing how a caller or first responder an employee interacted with “was an idiot” are very common and are usually told in the context of a

venting session. The offending party might be a caller, a first responder, or another employee. Although “being an idiot” is not the only reason a venting session is initiated, the purpose of the stories told during these sessions is to criticize the problematic speech or actions of others. A single venting story might be told when an employee is extremely frustrated. Venting gets its designation from that process. An employee turns to another employee and rattles off a sixty second description of what just occurred. An employee might also vent a stream of obscenities at a computer when they are frustrated and too busy to talk. Often telling one story elicits another story and if radio traffic is not busy, or phone calls are not constant, employees will exchange stories.

These stories are usually shared while they are happening to another employee who is sitting nearby. The structure of the workplace impacts how, when and why these venting sessions occur. The police dispatch pod has four employees in close proximity with one another and all within speaking range. The same is true of the fire pod and certain segments of the calltaking pod. An event that just occurred often starts the venting sessions. There are other reasons these storytelling events might begin. Often it is a recent offense that starts the session. “Recently” is usually dependent on when the employee was first able to start talking. During busy radio traffic the frustrating event might have occurred two hours ago but “recently” is considered the first time the employee can talk about it.

Most stories told in a venting session are narrated only once by the person the event happened to. Some stories attain a certain status and become circulated and told by other coworkers if they are particularly gruesome or humorous. Venting stories often have an angry tone to them or an element of frustration, but

this anger or frustration can be directed to what sometimes feels like an innumerable amount of sources. Often the frustration is reasonable in the presence of other 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers. Yet, some people outside the 9-1-1 community might not find our frustration with a caller who would not stop screaming while they were being burglarized reasonable or appropriate.

As Jack Santino proposes in most workplaces workers are telling stories during breaks or times when they are not otherwise engaged because they are too busy dealing with work-related tasks to tell stories.⁶³ While there are times of the year and specific days in which BOEC employees might not have down time for several hours, when one works night-shift there are inevitably times where there are no calls coming in and there is nothing to dispatch. Consequently, nightshifters have some “downtime” while we are actually working and usually have time to tell stories in-between calls or radio transmissions. Furthermore, since we have mute buttons on our microphones we are able to comment on calls while they are actually taking place by turning to a coworker and turning our microphone off and speaking. Employees can also editorialize or provide commentary on officer’s transmissions when the dispatcher’s foot is off the transmit peddle and the dispatcher is not actively responding to the officer on the radio but is still hearing the officer talk. Venting sessions usually arise in these spaces and are commonly prompted by one coworker’s experience and lead to a discussion of these grievances. These might begin with “such and such officer just said this to me on the radio. Can you believe it?” The follow-up narrative might be about the same officer, if this officer makes a habit of being rude on the radio, or, for instance, a comparable story where a different officer

⁶³ Santino, “Characteristics of Occupational Narratives,” 201.

said something similar. The following is an example of venting between two dispatchers who are discussing call performance. They start by discussing two computer commands used to alter a call sent to dispatch. One command alters the location without notifying the dispatcher. The other command directly messages the dispatcher about the new location of the call. The informally-accepted practice, and incidentally the Standard Operating Procedure, is if no officers are assigned to the call, a calltaker can change the location of the call without notifying the dispatcher. Once officers are enroute the dispatcher must be notified with a message using the “sup” (supplemental information) command. This is not just an arbitrary rule since dispatchers need to know where to tell responders to go. Also calltakers manipulating dispatcher’s calls from afar can lead to awkward situations, since responders can read the calls on the computers in their cars. It can be unpleasant for a dispatcher for responders to have information that you, as a dispatcher, do not. The following is a transcribed segment of a conversation between myself and Elaine Bennett which included a venting session.

Elaine: Well I think the sup thing is, I only say something now, 'cause they just recently came out with that . . .

Megan: Roll call

Elaine: Review the [two commands used to modify call locations] rules and whatnot and when you should do one or the other... and they are gonna take the time to do that then maybe we all need to take the time to say yeah this is ridiculous... I don't know.

Megan: Well and people, the other day someone, it was like a priority two call with three officers on it and this calltaker [changed the location without notifying the dispatcher] to a new address while they were on it and already going... and you are just sort of like ohhh ... that is

frustrating since they recently did that thing... you should review when you are doing this.⁶⁴

This example of a calltaker's error elicits another story about calltaker error from me. Although it is about a different kind of problem, both stories are about difficulties that arise when dispatchers and calltakers try to communicate about response location. Significantly, the offending parties in both narratives were "calltaker only" at the time these mistakes were made. The narratives also illustrate the friction between dispatchers and calltakers. There is a common perception, which I don't support, that calltakers don't have the appropriate skills to calltake because they don't understand what responders need or the effects of their actions on dispatchers. Elaine continues in the same interview by stating

I think I do callbacks when I want someone to do something about it... One calltaker sent me this call and all it said was, and the first line should tell you, [long pause] baby's, 'cause it wasn't the child's mom. Somebody watching a friend's... watching their 11 year old child and he has a fever and is not acting right... and just made it a police priority two... no medical nothing and that was all it said... and I was like maybe, he just needs a doctor [mutual laughter] so I did a callback with well maybe this needs medical and two minutes later you know the calltaker added medical and said you know the kid was fine basically but just had a fever and wasn't himself⁶⁵

In this situation, since it was during a formal interview, the venting of frustrations about calltaker error was able to proceed unimpeded. In many situations whoever is telling the story, or someone involved in the conversation, will get a call and their narration will be interrupted by having to answer a 9-1-1 phone call or speak on the radio. Consequently, as a result of interruptions, many

⁶⁴ Interview with Elaine Bennett

⁶⁵ Interview with Elaine Bennett

stories will take much longer to tell and be fractured. This often leads to repetition or summary for other workers who were busy.

The venting of frustrations at dispatch positions takes on a much different role than venting at calltaking. The above quotes from interviews more closely resemble venting at calltaking. Two calltakers can go “into not ready,” pause the calls coming in to them temporarily, and exchange two or three full descriptions of an incident with the hope a supervisor does not notice. Dispatchers cannot tell first responders to wait, although they can pause their transmissions on the radio by two to three seconds. Noticeably there is also less venting about specific job tasks in the fire pod. There is typically, on night shift, more time to talk freely in the fire pod and the discussion might consider larger work related concerns such as larger policy changes. I am quite sure, even though I haven’t worked a dayshift in some time that this is not the case on dayshift since there are more calls for medical and fire service during the day. The interactions with responders at fire dispatch are often less personal than at police, where dispatchers have more repeated direct contact with the same officers. The venting at fire might be more general, whereas the venting at police dispatch is often directed at specific officers.

At police dispatch the dispatcher is sitting in a half circle with four other dispatchers and while performing this role an employee often spends less time talking but have to be focused on what is being said on the radio. While performing this duty, venting sessions do not usually present themselves as circles of people telling stories but involve one person shouting at another person. One dispatcher will become frustrated with an officer and turn to another dispatcher to vent this frustration. For example “does this asshole always have to

ask a question after he is dispatched on E-V-E-R-Y [takes the time to say each letter] single call he is dispatched on.” Dispatchers will turn to a coworker and yell about what has been said to them or what has happened and as long as they are not transmitting over the radio. Therefore the individual officer who caused this response will not be aware of it. There are also some cases in which people just yell obscenities to themselves, most commonly commenting on how an officer is a “fucking idiot” or similar. While these outbursts are not intended specifically for any one person, everyone in the general area can hear them. This is how venting traditionally occurs at dispatch positions because there simply is not time to express the full scope and dynamism of the concern and actually engage in a discussion. In such instances, in which a venting session or dialogue with other employees are not possible, a shouted expletive is all one can do to vent frustration or anger at the time of a transgression or irritating event.

Cautionary Stories

The function of cautionary stories is more inherent to the narrative and the performance of cautionary stories, unlike venting sessions and first-time stories. Since these stories are told to be instructive they are meant to impart knowledge to the listener. They can be teaching tools. One basic structure is the following example: “They tell you to X first when you have a traffic pursuit in the sim[ulation] room, I learned you have to do Y first instead if you don’t want a sergeant to yell at you on the air.” Cautionary stories are often related by senior employees, but also by employees who had a specific negative experience. This could involve another coworker, a specific incident, or a specific responder. It often demonstrates to other employees how to stay out of trouble with a specific

individual or how to avoid being disciplined by management. However, when the workplace recently switched to a new computer aided dispatch system, cautionary stories became more prevalent. These stories were not just told by senior employees to less senior employees. All the certified employees trying to learn a new computer system were telling cautionary stories. Often these stories might support claims by VCAD instructors that certain functions in the new CAD system did in fact work when their functionality was questioned by the operations floor. An equal number of times these stories might oppose this information. These stories were intended to spread experiential knowledge about the new system to other employees on the operations floor. The stories might also explain why something operations staff was doing because of misperceptions, due to a short training process on the new system, was not working in practice. The new computer system resulted in widespread policy changes. As a result, there were many cautionary stories told about these changes, which functioned as reminders to consider these new changes.

Cautionary stories serve important roles within the rubric of the workplace, as Archie Green notes in his research. The workplaces he studied often included physical or manual labor. "Absorbed in such horror stories, we dissolved our fears within a comrade's tragedy. Essentially, we turned story sessions into ritual, helping us borrow courage from previous job victims."⁶⁶ At the 9-1-1 call center the "victims" would not be victims of a physical nature but rather victims of some discipline or some embarrassment "on the air." For example, an employee makes mistake, like missing premise information for a

⁶⁶Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes*, 355.

five car officer response, and is the yelled at by a sergeant over the radio. For one or two address locations, the information about the five car response is tucked away with some less important information in the premise information file. The story about this mistake warns other employees to be mindful of this location and the “hidden” premise information. Although I am reluctant to argue as Green does, that these stories are similar to rituals, I do acknowledge these stories help “borrow” lessons from another employee’s previous experience.

There also are general themes surrounding cautionary stories. Rather than illustrating one specific skill that an employee should be careful about and proficient in, some stories represent general ideas which should be adhered to, as the following example illustrates:

Mabel: Alright so this guy calls up and he says ‘me and my boys’ and it was in the winter and there is snow ‘me and my boys was headed up on Brower Creek road and we came across an ATV.’ And I said ‘well is it wrecked?’ ‘No not wrecked it is just sitting there on the road it is almost brand new.’ And I think ‘well does it look like it has been in a wreck you know.’ ‘No it is just sitting there.’ ‘Well is there any trailers around that look like they unloaded it?’ ‘No that is the thing there ain’t nothing around. It is just sitting there waiting for someone to steal it.’ And I go ‘So there is nobody around. There are no tracks in the snow, like somebody broke down and they walked away from it.’ ‘Nope nope nothing like that.’ So I am thinking to myself ‘property’ right? And I said ‘So you didn’t see any tracks nothing?’ ‘No but this probably don’t have nothing to do with it. We saw this old helmet kinda hanging in the tree a ways away.’ [laughter] And I go ‘Like a motorcycle helmet?’ ‘Yeah you know hanging in the tree.’ I said ‘But you didn’t see any tracks anyone yelling for help anything like that nothing.’ ‘Nope just the ATV and that helmet up in the tree.’ So I am thinking ‘god, I know this is nothing but sure as shit if I don’t set it up its gonna be a something.’ They got out there and sure enough the dude had been bucked off down an embankment and it turned into a rope rescue.

Megan: “[gasp] A rope rescue?”

Mabel: “Yeah and his helmet had flown up into the tree. So if you don’t set something up...”⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Personal Interview with Mabel.

The storyteller is illustrating a general rule of calltaking, if you don't make a call for service or ignore what a caller is saying you run the risk of making an error that becomes hugely problematic down the line. In this case the most mundane of calls, a property call that an officer responds to when they are not on a priority call, becomes one of the more dramatic of the more common fire calls, a rope rescue. Her point is clear here: "I know this is nothing but sure as shit if I don't set it up its gonna be a something."⁶⁸ In this case there is no specific example of a trick or skill the storyteller is impressing upon the listeners. This is a reminder to other certified dispatchers and calltakers not to discount callers or supposedly innocuous situations since these can become matters of life and death.

Cautionary stories also can have humorous elements to them, although many do not. Often stories regarding another employee's behavior illustrate what not to do in the workplace, but also poke fun at workplace conditions. The following story, which is commonly believed not to be true and has been attributed to a number of different people currently who are no longer employed at the call center, deals with a fantasy many calltakers have expressed having when dealing with difficult callers.

Megan: She told that caller to fuck off that one time.

Elaine: [laughter] awesome.

Megan: While she was in phones training.

Elaine: I thought that was...

Megan: No, in phones training she told someone to fuck off.

Elaine: While being monitored?

⁶⁸ Personal Interview with Mabel.

Megan: She was suspended for six weeks.

Elaine: On pay? [In an excited tone.]

Megan: Oh no I don't believe so. There weeks of paid suspension for telling someone to fuck off... [mutual laughter] I don't think so.⁶⁹

The story, which is cautionary, since it illustrates the possible outcome of getting unpaid time off of work, is also humorous. It implies, at least for the two dispatchers talking, that unpaid time off of work might actually be a good thing. It also illustrates the importance of humor in the 9-1-1 call center. The inherent structure of the story is intended to illustrate this type of behavior and being overly rude to callers is not appropriate. In general cautionary stories are meant to be instructive. When there are new policies, and procedures seem to change day by day sometimes at a 9-1-1 call center, cautionary stories function to pass on experiences one employee had that might save another employee from discipline or embarrassment.

⁶⁹ Interview with Elaine Bennett.

CHAPTER VII

ELEMENTS OF THE WORKPLACE REFLECTED IN NARRATIVES

This chapter discusses elements of the workplace often reflected in narratives, whether the narratives occur in one medium or are multi-modal. The first section examines disembodied trauma in the experience of 9-1-1 calltakers and dispatchers. The second section explores the significance of dark humor in the workplace and its in venting frustrations about the workplace.

understanding of worker experience at a 9-1-1 call center. Finally I examine the significance of gender dynamics in the 9-1-1 call center as it is a significant element in the daily performance of a 9-1-1 dispatcher or calltaker's job. Gender is often only mentioned in passing in the workplace, with a couple of lines devoted to joking about how a male calltaker is always a cop and a female calltaker is always an operator. Larger questions of a dispatcher and calltaker's authority, whether they are male or female, are often concealed in unease about the role allied disciplines and callers feel that dispatchers and calltakers occupy and are often expressed in these comments about gender.

Disembodied Trauma in the 9-1-1 Experience

The experience of trauma in a 9-1-1 call center is a disembodied experience. 9-1-1 calltakers and dispatchers are not present at the scenes of the incidents they send first responders to but are nonetheless exposed to the experience of traumatic events by listening to the events on the phone or radio. The use of language in the narratives told by 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers reveal their experiences as language plays an important role in the theorization

of pain and trauma. When a 9-1-1 calltaker is listening to a call they are often able to hear gruesome details. They can hear the sounds of fists hitting another person's flesh. They can hear a caller crying because they are afraid someone who shouldn't be inside their house will find them. Calltakers talk to bystanders who come across traffic accidents and the calltaker can hear the victim in the accident coughing up blood when the bystander tries to check if the victim is conscious. The calltaker can hear fear and excitement in the caller's voice. They can also hear disquieting background noises such as screams, gun shots, or sudden silences. Dispatchers at a 9-1-1 call center also often tackle difficult calls. They may receive a call for dispatch when a mother finds her husband sexually abusing their child. The text of this call is read by the dispatcher on the computer screen who then must read the text verbally to officers over the air on the radio. Afterwards, they might not know the outcome of the incident other than that the male was arrested. Based on these brief examples I hope the reader can imagine other types of incidents 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers encounter. In fact, the reader does not even need to imagine it, as the recordings of these calls are on the internet and reenactments of the incidents depicted on television shows may contain the original recordings.

First responders, witnesses, victims and suspects all interact physically with many of these traumatic calls for service. 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers must interact with them from afar. How can we understand these disembodied experiences without discounting these experiences as somehow illegitimate or "not real" because dispatchers and calltakers "weren't there." Elaine Scarry's argument in *The Body in Pain* centers on the assertion that physical pain is

incomparable with other experiences because “it has no object.”⁷⁰ This means there can be no bonding between the internal experience and a condition in the outside world. Objects express the conditions of the outside world and are extensions of internal states such as hunger. The same is not true for pain. “The only state that is anomalous as pain is the imagination. While pain is a state remarkable for being wholly without objects, the imagination is remarkable for being the only state that is wholly its objects.”⁷¹ In this instance, Scarry is specifically discussing the physical experience of pain. However, her analysis helped me think about how 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers experience trauma and distress through technological mediums. There is no physical object for them to reference; they can only reference the sounds or text of an event. However, the imagination is the place where dispatchers and calltakers experience traumatic calls for service. This does not mean their experiences are “less real” only that we must approach these experiences differently, as Scarry’s groundbreaking work approach pain and torture reconfigured the understanding of the experience of pain. We can approach the ways narrative structures deal with the problems of disembodied trauma with the recognition that physical experience is not the limit of traumatic experience or emotional connection.

In *Women Escaping Violence*, Elaine Lawless describes the importance of gaps in women's narratives that talk about escaping domestic violence. She proposes “that both images are available to us through the gaps and the ruptures of narratives of disaster: the *essence* of the event we recognize as *the disaster*, which may, in fact loom as largely unarticulated in its horror but evoked in the

⁷⁰ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 161.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

silences, as well as the *now* . . . that is also discernible in these stories, in the gap, might suggest another story, a more personal story the narrator hopes to convey.”⁷² Lawless states later in her chapter: “The stories in my study reveal how narrative operates for the female storytellers in both acknowledging and contesting what has been acted upon their bodies and upon their minds; the narratives seem to break down where *language* breaks down. But perhaps language does not fail either; perhaps the failure is in the receiving of the stories, in the failure to discern what is being said.”⁷³ Although the narratives of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers operate differently than the narratives of victims of domestic violence, there is a similar break down in language, where language fails the experience of the calltaker or dispatcher. Elaine Scarry’s book *Thinking in an Emergency* looks at the “spurious invocation of emergency in the nuclear age” and how this invocation has made individuals give up their “powers of resistance and our elementary forms of political responsibility.”⁷⁴ In this larger discussion Scarry states language disappears during the emergencies of everyday life. “Words are replaced by loud noises, crude sirens, harsh horns— one-syllable sounds that act as placeholders for language until it can return.”⁷⁵ Emergencies are spaces where language typically fails people involved in the situation. Yet for 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers words are the key elements they deploy during an emergency.

⁷² Lawless, *Women Escaping Violence*, 62.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷⁴ Scarry, *Thinking in an Emergency*, 7.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

Narratives about a gruesome call might include gory details and retell the experience blow-by-blow. But often these narratives are lacking the personal details of the dispatcher or calltaker's experience. Language can retell the events of the call, the narrative of the calltaker, or the anger of the dispatcher at some detail of the dispatching of the call, but it fails to completely communicate the dispatcher's or calltaker's connection to the incident. The fact that these events happen to dispatchers and calltakers only through sound and never through a direct physical encounter is significant. In his analysis of the impact of traumatic experience on so called "outsider" artists and self-taught artists, Daniel Wojcik states, "while exact definitions may vary, the general consensus is that a traumatic experience essentially fragments the survivor's feeling of unity of self."⁷⁶ Artistic creation, in the case of individuals engaged in art therapy, might be a method of access to the traumatic experience. As Wojcik states later in the chapter, "because the experience of severe trauma is generally considered to be inaccessible to the conscious mind of the trauma victim, other than as intrusive and vividly present repetitions of the moment of trauma, direct expression of the experience as sought in standard therapeutic situations is often impossible. Artistic creation, however, as theorized by contemporary art therapists, may present a method of bypassing the defense mechanisms of the mind to directly access the unconscious."⁷⁷

Although his analysis is specifically addresses visual images, it raises a question about the usefulness of creative expression in addressing experiences of trauma. 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers do engage in creative expression

⁷⁶ Wojcik, "Outsider Art Realms: Visionary Worlds, Trauma, and Transformation," 59.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

through their narratives. Furthermore, many 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers have a hobby or creative outlet that involves creating visual images or objects. Although none of these projects, to my knowledge, specifically address issues of trauma, the creative expression of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers should be studied further in order to examine how trauma specifically reflects itself in certain forms of expression, whether verbally, visually or other ways. The type of work 9-1-1 calltakers and dispatchers perform is a new sort of experience, as they must repeatedly hear the accounts of upsetting events in rapid succession over the phone. It developed as the profession of telecommunicator arose out of the specific need for someone to perform the function of the profession. As the experience of this profession is a recent development, within the past forty years, the effects of this type of involvement with traumatic events has yet to be fully understood.

A brief report on a recent study in April 2012 entitled “Duty-Related Trauma Exposure in 9-1-1 Telecommunicators: Considering the Risk for Posttraumatic Stress” claims to be the only published work the researchers were aware of which “examined the relationship between duty-related trauma exposure, peritraumatic distress, and PTSD symptoms in telecommunicators.”⁷⁸ In their study, they illustrate the types of situations 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers encounter. “Results showed that calls frequently encountered by telecommunicators can produce feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror. A disproportionate amount of worst calls experienced by the sample involved harm to a child or were calls that involved a personal or professional relationship

⁷⁸ Pierce and Lilly, “Duty-Related Trauma Exposure in 911 Telecommunicators: Considering the Risk for Posttraumatic Stress,” 3.

with the victim / caller (i.e., police officers, emergency medical technicians, and firefighters).⁷⁹ The authors conclude that “direct, physical exposure to trauma may not be necessary to increase risk for PTSD”⁸⁰ in the population of telecommunicators they studied. Even though 9-1-1 calltakers and dispatchers might be physically safe, their physical distance and inability to effect change in the situation they are listening to can be distressing for calltakers and dispatchers. The long silence while non-emergency radio traffic is off the air and a dispatcher is waiting for cover to arrive for an officer they know personally and is in distress can be disturbing when all a dispatcher can do is send the closest police cars to the right location. Speaking from my personal experience, I can attest to the fact that listening and being able to do nothing other than type the right location in a computer does not always provide the catharsis one needs to deal with a troubling situation.

As I stated previously in this thesis, I present some of my own narratives to discuss traumatic events. This is not to say the coworkers I interviewed did not have narratives about traumatic calls or that I could not have asked about them. After one interview where I asked about the “worst type of call,” the coworker I interviewed was noticeably distressed and noted she was still upset about talking about the call several days later. Perhaps this is one of the problems of doing research within your own community and I tried to avoid the topic afterwards because I didn’t want to make one of my friends have these feelings. Therefore, as an alternative, I present my own narratives with the hope that a reader will be sympathetic to my unwillingness to delve into this issue

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1.

further in interviews with fellow employees and also with the understanding my narratives are reflective of common concerns I have noted within the community.

This first narrative was collected in a self-interview conducted with my partner Adam Rothstein.

Megan: But then too, I had those . . . those parents drown their eight year old daughter or whatever.

Adam: But you didn't know that at the time. That was the one where you said you knew there was something wrong but you didn't know at the time. Because they only found that out, the cops found that out later. When they got there.

Megan: Yeah so I knew something had happened but I didn't know but still like that is supposed to be the most traumatic one and whenever people are like what is the worst call you have even taken I always just want to blurt that one out and be like fuck you that is the worst call I have taken 'cause they always ask you that as if you are a freakshow and you are just like yeah 'people kill their kids welcome to America.'

Adam: It is funny they want to know what the extent of calls are 'cause they can imagine the least bad call so they are wondering what the worst is.

Megan: and then I am like 'noise complaints [mutual laughter].'⁸¹

Not knowing what happened is a common theme in narratives about a traumatic call. In this case this incident most likely would not have become an event I told a story about ever except for the fact that an officer later told me what had, possibly, happened. I still don't really know. There are notes in the call and a request for medical in the text of the call that illustrates something other than what I thought was occurring had transpired. However, the information about what happened came from one source and was not information from a final investigation of the incident, only conjecture. It is an incident I have only discussed once with my coworkers, since I don't want to upset my coworkers

⁸¹ Self-reflexive interview with Megan Rothstein.

with children. These calls are generally more difficult for employees with children even though they would be upsetting to any employee. This is common and has been remarked upon by coworkers, since a calltaker might keep a call like this to themselves.

If a calltaker is yelling at a caller about a traumatic call, other coworkers will ask about it or follow up. But if a calltaker takes a traumatic call quietly, others, except the dispatcher, might not need to know about it. This example of my narrative illustrates the lack of detail present in many of the most traumatic stories. All I say is “I had those . . . those parents drown their eight year old daughter or whatever.”⁸² I don’t discuss the details of the event and this is common across dispatcher and calltaker narratives about the “worst calls.” Often dispatchers and calltakers use their imagination or lack of information to fill in the gaps of a call or event. As Lawless points out narrative often fails an extreme experience. For 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers this is not only because the words are not there to talk about the event, but because the fullness of the story is not present either. I would conjecture that many other dispatchers and calltakers do not feel they have the words to tell a story they only have a partial picture of. The only time I have mentioned this story in the past three years was on this recording during the interview for this project and once before to upset a citizen who asked me “what is the worst call you have ever taken?” when I was in a bad mood.

Calltakers and dispatchers also gage the severity of an incident differently than a citizen on the street might. The study on PTSD mentioned earlier notes dispatchers and calltakers categorize a traumatic or “worst call” based on several

⁸² Ibid.

noticeable criteria. These worst calls involved harm to a child or harm to someone the dispatcher or calltaker has a personal or professional relationship with. There are numerous types of calls for service dispatchers and calltakers deal with that citizens would perceive as traumatic. However the dispatchers and calltakers do not necessarily categorize these calls as such. Also the callers calling 9-1-1 for help would categorize their experiences as traumatic and the calltaker might not because of the familiarity of certain types of calls like assaults and accidents. As an example, the officer who is fighting with a suspect without cover (another officer there with her or him) for several minutes will have a different relationship with that experience than a dispatcher who just holds the non emergency radio traffic and sends cover in a routine way. Callers and first responders also might not understand why a specific call is frustrating or upsetting for a dispatcher or calltaker as well. In the case of the quotation I include below I am explain my feelings about a fairly typical call, a robbery at gunpoint.

And I think it is just easier to go from, I am trying to think of the last thing where I was... I literally can't remember... now I take calls for two hours and at the end I just want people to shut up, you know, as opposed to... I mean it is kind of these formative moments you know what I mean? Instead of being upset by someone who has been robbed at gunpoint you are irritated at the fact they won't stop crying and give you the information you want . . . you start to focus on it that. You're some people who have been robbed at gunpoint are totally able to answer your questions and reasonable. So then when people aren't and they are hysterical and blubbing your are irritated because your . . . I need to get the description of the car faster and you are stopping me from doing that because you are annoying me by being emotional. It is a transition to a mind set that."⁸³

⁸³ Ibid.

Trauma becomes a very specific type of experience for dispatchers and calltakers, as there are certain types of calls that are outside the scope of normal day to day operations. Unfortunately for the general public in Portland, robberies at gunpoint fall under the category of day-to-day operations. This is not to say this type of call would not upset a trainee and they would most likely include their first robbery at gunpoint in their repertoire of first-time stories. However, after a period of enculturation calls like robberies become more commonplace. In this description I state I am “irritated at the fact they won’t stop crying and give you the information you want.”⁸⁴ This type of statement will become significant in chapter eight on multi-modal communication in the workplace. In general, most calltakers are still compassionate on the phone with callers who have been robbed at gunpoint or experience similar types of experiences. However, calltakers might become curt with callers who think that their hedge being trimmed by a neighbor is “traumatic” and behave accordingly on the phone by screaming hysterically. After dispatchers and calltakers become accustomed to certain types of experiences, when less traumatic experiences are related by caller’s dispatchers dispense their sympathy vigilantly. Frustrations with day-to-day operations often become more central in certain types of narratives and more appropriate to share on the operations floor. Furthermore, while the setting and social structure of the workplace readily allows for sharing of stories that can be overheard by other employees, employees less frequently have the ability to communicate and share the deeper emotions behind their experiences. The disembodied experience of trauma at a 9-1-1 call center and the structure of narrative swapping only allows a certain depth of examination for

⁸⁴ Ibid.

employees. Clearly the responses 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers have to the types of calls they experience needs further study, which the PTSD study mentioned above demonstrates. Narratives collected from a call center might be a place to start such research with the specific focus of understanding dispatcher and calltaker's experiences of disembodied trauma.

Frustration, Workplace Bureaucracy and Dark Humor

"I wish I was dead." This is probably not a statement typically shared with other coworkers in most workplaces. Dark humor comes in many forms at BOEC. Coworkers might joke about killing themselves, killing others, laugh at mentally ill people, repeat phrases said by frightened callers that the calltaker found humorous, or laugh at the ignorance of callers or officers. In his analysis of the function of narrating, folklorist William Wilson describes the role of storytelling and experience of Mormon missionaries. "First, if nothing else, folklore will tell managers and leaders where the sore spots really are. The language people use, the jokes they play, and the tales they spin will tell the perceptive observer much about people's deepest feelings and concerns; they will help us locate the places where rules may need to be adjusted."⁸⁵ Wilson suggests managers and leaders of organizations can learn from the vernacular expression of their workers. At BOEC dark humor often intersects with frustrations about management. This is not to say this is the only time this type of humor is shared, but it is a significant point for analysis. As Wilson notes, humor often reflects the conditions of the workplace and frustrations with certain elements of the

⁸⁵ Wilson, "Dealing with Organizational Stress," 278.

workplace. I would not be overstepping my bounds if I generalized and were to say that there was a broad distrust and dislike of “upper-level management” at my 9-1-1 call center. This would be designated as management who work in offices. Supervisors on the operations floor, who are present 24/7, are technically management but many workers do not place them in the same category as “upper-level management.”

In a thesis on occupational folklore at Kinko's, written by a former University of Oregon graduate student Stephanie Huffman in 1996, notes examples of humorous behavior by employees in the workplace. “The playful use of supplies is not limited to rubberbands. Co-workers make crafts out of the various leftover supplies in the store. One Halloween an especially creative employee made a “lamination girl” outfit out of leftover lamination by stapling it together to make a shirt, pants, and hat . . . Other kinds of play include shooting rubberbands, making prank phone calls within the store, untying other people's aprons, and creating fake orders.”⁸⁶ This example demonstrates that workers often make jokes or create humor out of what they are provided with. Kinko’s staff has the freedom to manipulate materials, apparently unhampered by management, and did not appear to engage in any subversive attacks on management. I might conclude, although Huffman did not state this, that staff at Kinko’s might not have the same contentious relationship with management BOEC staff have.

In the interview between two dispatchers quoted earlier, two dispatchers are venting about a calltaker’s manipulation of a call and thought it quite funny to make unpaid time off of work for doing something that is very clearly outside

⁸⁶ Huffman, “Folklore of Release, Resistance, and Rewards,” 23.

of Standard Operating Procedure (telling a caller to fuck off) a subject of humor. More frequently dispatchers and calltakers are laughing at things people outside of that particular workplace, or an allied discipline, most likely would not find humorous. Often the humor shared at BOEC is dark or “twisted.” A common dry joke is the response to an innocuous question with “whatever is safest for you.” This is a common response to questions from certain types of callers on the 9-1-1 lines. Often callers will ask for advice that a dispatcher simply can’t give, such as when they want to be told what to do. “Should I leave? Should I stay?” Aside from telling them not to follow a suspect, often the answer to these types of questions is some variation on “whatever is safest for you.” Indeed, many calltakers use the phrase “you need to do whatever is safest for you,” or some variation of this statement, to make it known to a caller that they must “choose their fate.” This is an issue of liability, since a calltaker doesn’t want to tell someone to do something that is dangerous for them because of some hazard the calltaker can not possibly know about. As a result, among calltakers the phrase “you should do whatever is safest for you” becomes a sassy remark to even the most mundane questions. “Do you think I should make more coffee?” meets with the response “you should do whatever is safest for you.” Although this might not appear to be dark humor, the underlying reference to the decisions 9-1-1 calltakers and dispatchers must commonly make causes us to think about this joke differently.

Dry jokes about “killing yourself” are shared between dispatchers and calltakers. After a new radio tower was installed outside of the operations building it became the impetus for several joke telling sessions about suicide. The tower is about fifty feet tall, although it might be higher. Along with several of

my coworkers, I participated in a joke telling session about the new tower. The tower was significant because there “were so many ways to kill yourself with it.” Suggestions included throwing yourself from it, which was considered too obvious. But then the forms of suicide became more elaborate. “Climbing halfway up the tower and hanging yourself from it.” “Throwing yourself from it and impaling yourself on the exterior fence of the building which has a pointed top on each part of the fence.” “Waiting for a specific manager to leave the building and throwing yourself onto the hood of their car from halfway up the tower.” Then there was talk of some type of electrocution, which I am not sure is even possible, but was nonetheless a topic of discussion. The general theme behind these jokes, even if not explicitly mentioned, is that all employees at BOEC are so dissatisfied with the way the workplace is run and the stress of the job that they would rather be dead than work there. Although I can’t speak to the prevalence of these types of jokes on day shift, when I was briefly on afternoon shift several employees told jokes about crying on the way to work or in the drive-thru line to Starbucks, so there is some evidence similar feelings may be present across the spectrum of employees. I must also note my presence might be significant in some of these responses as It has been noted by some coworkers that I often start these joking sessions, since one of my typical responses to “how are you” is “praying for the sweet release only death can bring.”

The jokes about suicide that are often explicitly related to workplace dissatisfaction are frequently connected to, what is perceived to be, a mismanagement of the workplace by “upper-level management.” Jokes about

suicide at BOEC represent the same “perception of appropriate incongruity”⁸⁷ that Elliot Oring says underlies all humor. Oring also gives us a broad idea about why jokes that are usually perceived to be tasteless or cruel are significant and serve a purpose. “Jokes are forms par excellence that deal with situations of unspeakability, because they may conjoin an unspeakable, and hence incongruous, universe of discourse to a speakable one.”⁸⁸ This might point to a larger view of dark humor at a 9-1-1 call center. It helps employees deal with and process their experiences with events that are outside the norm of what many people experience. The jokes about suicide I presented above also serve a more specific function. In his discussion of the popularity of dead baby jokes among American adolescents folklorist Alan Dundes refers to several of the fears the joke cycle might represent. These fears include growing concerns about technology, racist attitudes, and the need “to make light of the worst kind of human atrocity” since one of the most popular time periods of the joke cycles telling was the 1970s during the Vietnam war.⁸⁹ Dundes goes on to note that jokes represent and reflect the society in which they are told. Furthermore, censorship of jokes would not be the way to “solve” the problems these jokes represent.⁹⁰ Using Wilson’s assertion that jokes are a way to understand the problems in an organization, we can make a conclusion about the jokes 9-1-1 calltakers and dispatchers make. Whether or not management thinks our

⁸⁷ Oring, “Jokes of the Discourse on Disaster,” 277.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 282.

⁸⁹ Dundes, “The Dead Baby Cycle,” 153.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 155.

criticisms of them are valid there is still the perception of unhappiness with how BOEC is managed and this is expressed through joking.

Lisa Gabbert and Antonio Salud II suggest humor is used in hospitals to subvert the biomedical discourse created during attempts to control human bodies under totalizing medical institutions. Although medical humor has previously been conceptualized as functioning to “relieve stress, to express hostility toward patients and co-workers, to express irritation at having to provide useless care, or to address the social taboos that physicians routinely break during the course of medical procedures”⁹¹ Gabbert and Salud suggest tensions in the medical workplace develops the “medical carnivalesque.” They state, “the grotesque, out-of-control body constitutes a powerful image that counters the modern project of staving off death at all costs. This image calls attention to absolute control as absurd, making mockery of the sacrosanct nature of modern medicine . . . the use of humor and carnivalesque laughter go directly against the instrumental use of language among medical staff.”⁹² I argue the use of language at a 9-1-1 call center is similar. Humorous language is used to counter the language that dispatchers and calltakers employ to control citizens and first responders through the radio and on the phone. In the next section of this thesis, I will examine the role gender plays in structuring the dynamics of a 9-1-1 call center. While humor and joking are used in the workplace to counter the control 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers must have over their callers and first responders, gender dynamics structure the workplace around a different set of

⁹¹ Gabbert and Salud, “On Salnderous Words and Bodies-Out-of-Control,” 210.

⁹² Ibid., 214.

preconceptions. I will consider how the characterization of the profession, both 9-1-1 dispatcher and calltaker, as a “woman’s job” impacts its expressive culture.

Gender Dynamics at a 9-1-1 Call Center

I begin this analysis of gender in a 9-1-1 call center by presenting the current gender ratios at the Bureau of Emergency Communications. As of September 2012 the operations floor staff is nearly one-third men and two-thirds women, with thirty-one men and sixty-seven female employees. This includes all employees who are currently working on the operations floor as non-supervisory employees. There are ninety-eight staff in total, not including an academy class currently in classroom training. A new academy must pass a series of tests during classroom training. During this time several people in the academy who do not pass qualifying tests are terminated. Therefore trainees are not factored into the floor culture until they are working on the operations floor. Of the ninety-eight staff, twelve of these employees are “calltaker only” who only process 9-1-1 and non-emergency calls. Of these twelve who work the “calltaker only” position, three of them are currently in police dispatch training. There are six employees who are training at calltaking and police dispatch and must always be supervised by a senior employee. There are four other trainees who are certified and can process phone calls alone and are being trained at police dispatch. Therefore there are seventy-six employees certified to dispatch police. There are ten supervisory employees who work on the operations floor. Four of the supervisors are male and six are female. The director of the Bureau is female, as is the operations floor manager and the assistant operations floor managers. Both union chapter chairs are male, but the president of the local who is a BOEC

employee is female, as is the chief steward. This is a picture of the current makeup of the operations floor, but since BOEC is currently in a process of trying to recruit more new employees, because of understaffing, the picture of who works on the floor can change every four months when an academy of new trainees reaches the operations floor. With an understanding of these ratios, we can begin to consider how the gender makeup of the floor (two-thirds women) impacts how the job is performed in contrast to the public and responder's perceptions of employment at a 9-1-1 call center as a "woman's job."

There is a general idea, often expressed off hand or in narratives among my coworkers, that men "have it easier" than women at BOEC. The callers are perceived to be nicer to men and be more willing to take instructions from male calltakers. Callers sometimes assume male calltakers are police officers. In other instances callers think male calltakers are police officers answering a cell phone and believe the calltaker will be the person responding to the caller's location to deal with a problem. There is also a perception that male officers respond better to male dispatchers and are more willing to take direction from male dispatchers than their female counterparts. It is not possible for me to report empirical evidence supporting or denying whether this is true. Although storytelling does not typically center on this sentiment, it is significant that this perception is supported by off hand comments.

Although the current data I have indicates the operations floor is one-third male, there is still a widespread perception that working as a dispatcher or calltaker is a woman's job. This is supported by callers who often refer to police officers as "he" when the caller is talking to a calltaker on the phone. For example, a caller might say, "I will tell him when he gets here" when a calltaker

is asking a caller questions to determine the type of police response. Similarly officers might also say “she needs to get that information from the caller” with the assumption the calltaker is female. This type of general gender categorization is supported by pronoun choice and general stereotypes about the work. Notably this is also supported by academic classifications of my research, since a presentation I gave at the University of Oregon's graduate student forum on 9-1-1 narratives was placed in the session “Women as Cultural Producers” even though I had not indicated anything about the gender of the people I was examining in my presentation. Gender might not be something that is addressed in narratives on the operations floor. There is an underlying assumption about the position and personality of women who have to control emergency situations and give direction to predominately male workforce who might not always be as open to direction from any source as dispatchers might like. The entire workforce, whether male or female, must contend with the general perception that being a dispatcher or calltaker is a woman's job.

Folklorist Michael Bell presents a relevant analysis of the roles of two female bartenders in *Tending Bar at Brown's*, identifying their roles in the bar as performances. As he demonstrates, a patron at the bar has a reflexive role in the social life of the bar. However the bartenders have a different role. “As actors on a stage, they possessed a framework of knowledge which allowed them to tend bar while simultaneously asserting that they were only actors and therefore not culpable for the actions the role caused them to perform.”⁹³ The reflexive role of the dispatcher who is socializing in the workplace differs from a performance on a 9-1-1 phone call or while talking on the radio. There is an artistic dimension

⁹³ Bell, “Tending Bar at Brown's,” 148.

present in using one's voice in either of these settings. However, it is commonly noted that the use of your voice is especially important while dispatching the police. On the police "nets" (dispatch radio channels) the whole pace of the radio traffic can depend on what the dispatcher's voice sounds like. Most dispatchers have some hurdle to overcome in this area during training. Some mumble or talk too fast. Others may talk like "valley girls" or can't "use their big girl voice" or they "sound too happy." Others cut themselves off or breathe through their mouth when speaking. Basically every dispatcher has some slight vocal characteristic that can be improved upon during training and adapted to the verbal performance of dispatching on the radio. A vocal performance on the radio is a role the dispatcher steps into, similar to Bell's description of bartending. The frame of this performance at work is where gender dynamics impact the individual dispatcher in the context of the overall dynamic of the call center.

In his research on flight attendants and pilots Santino notes "There are stories in which flight attendants and pilots deal with mechanical problems and emergency situations, but these are not as common as those that deal with the problems of resentment and conflict arising out of status relationships."⁹⁴ Santino also notes later in this same article that for superordinates (the pilots) the stories they tell demonstrate their skill and ability. Flight attendant's stories, on the other hand, deal with their interactions with pilots and customers. Santino notes about one flight attendant in particular, "she is pushed by these people to the point of action; it is at this point that she will reverse the status role or reverse

⁹⁴Santino, "Flew the Ocean in a Plane," 198.

expected patterns of behavior.”⁹⁵ Similar sorts of stories are common types of narratives in the 9-1-1 dispatch center. Dispatchers discuss when officers pushed them to act in a non-professional way because the officer’s conduct was so far outside of what was acceptable. This might include a witty remark back to the officer over the air or a snide remark through a computer to another dispatcher or to the offending officer. In the 9-1-1 dispatch center, whether the dispatcher or calltaker is male or female might not be significant. What is significant is the perspective of the responder or the citizen calling for service. Responders and citizens have preconceived notions of the gender of a 9-1-1 dispatcher and what their role in public safety is. In general the profession of dispatcher or calltaker, at least at BOEC, has more male dispatchers and calltakers than many outside the field might expect. However, the job of a dispatcher or calltaker is often viewed as subordinate by police and fire responders, who often project the tensions of their work onto dispatcher's mistakes, or callers, who may remind calltakers and dispatchers that their tax dollars pay for their salaries.

The tension between superordinate and subordinate that Santino identifies among flight attendants and pilots might not be as clear cut at a 9-1-1 call center. While the caller depends on the calltaker to send them help, in some non-emergency cases, which are not as clear cut in terms of what type of response the situation necessitates, the caller relies on the calltaker judging their call to be a valid call for dispatch. However, the calltaker can be subjected to whatever foul language a caller uses, if the caller chooses to behave this way, and the calltaker has little recourse to confront the caller about this type of behavior. While dispatchers send police officers to specific locations and have the power of

⁹⁵ Santino, “Flew the Ocean in a Plane,” 206.

a street sergeant over patrol officers, the general sentiment from police officers is that dispatchers are subordinate to the officer's position. However, these are still the boundaries and hierarchies upon which narratives arise and these negotiate the power dynamics between dispatchers and officers and calltakers and callers.

There are some situations in which being female is a benefit. Most often this would be with callers and on specific types of calls such as those dealing with rape or possibly medical calls. Each interpretation of a calltaker's gender relies on the perception of the caller. Some callers might think a female calltaker is a police officer while others may think they can boss the calltaker around because the calltaker is female. Each interaction with a caller is approximately two minutes and thirty seconds long. It is difficult to make assessments of each individual caller's assumptions in this type of time frame. In Brigitta Meurling's study of the construction professionalism in Swedish clergywomen (the Church of Sweden has ordained women since 1960) she makes the following observation. "As pointed out above, education, seriousness, professional altruism and gender are crucial in the construction of my informants' professionalism. If we concentrate here on the gender aspect of the clergywomen's professional project, we will notice that gender is always relevant; it can be regarded positively or negatively, but it is never neutral. To be a woman is regarded by some people in certain situations (such as weddings, christenings and funerals) as a positive aspect, while others (more often clergymen than parishioners) find it negative."⁹⁶ She also notes female clergywomen put more thought into how they dress since they want to articulate their professional competence while still dressing appropriately for the congregation. Meurling's analysis of the role of female

⁹⁶ Meurling "The Pure Heart,"129.

clergywomen helps us think about the role of female 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers. I might argue a male voice of authority can be neutral, while a female's voice in an authoritative position cannot be. Whether performing a passive role to avoid confrontation or actively asserting power, female dispatchers and calltakers must use their voice more consciously than male dispatchers and calltakers.

There are different styles of workplace performance that are tied to the employee's gender. For example, a female dispatcher may tell officers where to go in no uncertain terms or she might choose to use more congenial means to manipulate the responding resources. Similarly a male calltaker might have a friendly relationship with callers or decide to use the caller's perception he might be a police officer to manipulate the caller into doing something the calltaker needs the caller to do. These performances of role and tone vary from person to person. Each call or two-hour shot at a dispatch "net" varies as well. In her study of Pentecostal female pastors, folklorist Elaine Lawless states, "by firmly basing their role as preacher and pastor within the frameworks that support a traditional and spiritual religiosity . . . these female pastors are able to gain power and authority through already established female attributes."⁹⁷ The deployment of gender becomes malleable based on the conditions and the requirements of the situation. Analogous to Lawless's description of female pastors, female dispatchers and calltakers may access traditional maternal characteristics or they can subvert these characteristics. Because of the nature of

⁹⁷Lawless, "Access to the Pulpit", 259.

the work, this can be fluid and change from one call to another or throughout the course of the work day.

In her study of women's handles in the CB radio community, Susan Kalčík cites Erving Goffman and states "in face-to-face interaction there are two kinds of information people give about themselves: that which they *give* and that which they *give off*. The second acts as a check on the first. But in an interaction that is not face-to-face there is only the information *given*, in this case the handle and whatever else, fact or fiction, the speaker chooses to reveal about himself or herself."⁹⁸ Kalčík argues the handles of women in the CB community often illustrate a stereotypical duality between "the virgin and the whore, the good and bad girls."⁹⁹ However, Kalčík notes there is a wide range of women involved in the CB community. She concludes by asserting that the problems of communication on a radio, including static and poor equipment, means, "new CBers are cautioned to pick a clear, easily understood handle, one that alludes to something or someone familiar to most people. The recognizably 'feminine' handle, thus, is an important part of the performance of identity to persons interested in playing the dating and mating game."¹⁰⁰ Often, dispatchers especially, use their voice and their reputations to manage similar concerns on the radio. Frequently this leads officers to perceive an individual in ways they would not typically be perceived when they are able to *give* and *give off* information. Often these perceptions are related to intelligence and attractiveness, in the case of how police officers view police dispatchers. However, with all

⁹⁸ Kalčík, "Women's Handles and the Performance of Identity in the CB Community," 101.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

individuals on the end of our radios and phone lines, 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers make active choices, and have unconscious behaviors, which give off information about us as a calltaker or dispatcher. Gender stereotypes of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers are another stereotype about the work employees must manage. The role of gender in structuring fricative boundaries in the workplace is often implicit and it is compelling when we consider how 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers perform their work and their narratives in the workplace.

CHAPTER VIII

FRACTURED STORYTELLING, FRACTURED NARRATIVES

Multi-modal communication is useful for understanding 9-1-1 dispatcher's and calltaker's underlying fears about the meticulous work they must do in order to ensure the safety of the public and first responders. At a call center, informal discussion instead of use of formal resources like the Peer Support Team, are usually used to deal with traumatic incidents and elicit a lengthy recounting of the event in a one-on-one peer setting. Because of the nature of work at a 9-1-1 dispatch center, employees might start talking to one another and telling a story and then suddenly be interrupted by a call that comes in on the phone line or by a responder's transmission. The proximity and structure of the workplace at BOEC creates verbal and computer-mediated sharing of narratives. Also, narratives that intersect with both mediums and may include others like texting or Facebook posting. The structure of other workplaces might favor one type of sharing over the other, be it computer-mediated or verbal. However, we can imagine that in most contemporary workplaces communication about work occurs in person and in computer-mediated or cell phone-mediated communication, although I'm not sure if these narratives would always cross boundaries in every workplace the way they do at a 9-1-1 call center.

Computer-Mediated Communication

In *Ways of Speaking*, Dell Hymes states: "When the meanings of speech styles are analyzed, we realize that they entail dimensions of participant, setting,

channel, and the like, which partly govern their meanings. And analysis of these relevant features of these dimensions is found to implicate more than alternation of speech styles. It subtends norms of verbal conduct, or interaction, in general-- things such as rights to turns at talking, acceptable ways of getting the floor, whether more than one voice can be speaking at a time, and so on."¹⁰¹ Although Hymes was referring to narrating in face-to-face interactions, his ideas are also relevant for an understanding of computer-mediated narration and how and why narrators manage their performance in the workplace. Communication becomes computer-mediated either when the conversation is not appropriate to be said out-loud or when the person the employee is trying to communicate with is not able to communicate verbally, for instance if an employee wants to comment on another worker's, who is currently on the operations floor, job performance. Workplace computer-mediated communication, whether such communication is about work or social in nature, is influenced by the similar norms of conduct as communication that occurs in face-to-face interactions.

Because of the nature of work at a 9-1-1 dispatch center, employees might start talking to one another and telling a story and then suddenly be interrupted by a call that comes in or by a responder's transmission. The following scenario exemplifies a typical situation. The north precinct dispatcher turns to the east precinct dispatcher to start telling a story about a call they took on phones earlier. The two desks these dispatchers sit at are about five feet apart but are not adjacent to one another. The north dispatcher starts telling her story and the east dispatcher gets a transmission from an officer and must turn back to the work station. The east dispatcher then turns around again and the north dispatcher

¹⁰¹ Hymes, *Ways of Speaking*, 445.

continues the story. The north dispatcher has one concluding sentence to the story when all of a sudden the east dispatcher gets five or six transmissions from officers. Rather than requiring the east dispatcher to turn around again (in the expectation the east dispatcher might get very busy very quickly which is common for that precinct) the north dispatcher types a direct message to the east dispatcher in the computer with the final sentence to conclude the story.

Another example of how stories are told in this workplace involves yet a third means of communication: at the start of a shift two employees have a discussion about a certain event in the workplace, like another co-worker who takes calls too loudly in the opinion of other workers, often yelling at callers when it is not appropriate. Later in the shift the same co-worker takes another call too loudly, but in this instance the two employees who shared this story earlier in the night are now sitting across the room from one another but are still able to hear the volume of the call. One employee sends a direct message to the other employee in the computer aided dispatch system, simply sending the message: "phone." Such communication illustrates how one employee may share with another worker certain commentary that they do not want to be a matter of public record. The message "phone" means the other employee should check her personal cell phone that will then have a text message about the offensive workplace behavior. While there have been folkloristically-based studies that approach communication occurring solely online, we must also consider that certain communities communicate through computers and also have face-to-face incidents of communication. Therefore, computer-mediated communication must include an understanding of the structure and processes of the platform

used to mediate the communication and an understanding of how the in-person social structure is managed.

Significance of Multi-Modal Communication at BOEC

Communication at BOEC is often simultaneous. Rarely will a dispatcher or calltaker conduct one social conversation without interruption in one medium while not also conducting another work related or social conversation in the same, or another, medium. As I have demonstrated earlier, verbal communication is facilitated by the proximity of certain work terminals, such as all the dispatch positions in the police dispatch “pod.” We are also able to spend time communicating during work hours because we are allowed to occupy ourselves with hobbies like knitting, watching television programs and reading books during the time when we are working. However there is an expectation these activities will be terminated anytime there is work related business to attend to. Because incoming work, like a 9-1-1 phone call or transmissions from an officer, can be sporadic and are not controlled by the employee, multi-modal communication facilitates expression and narrative events among employees on the operations floor.

There are three main types of communication included in multi-modal communication. There is in-person verbal communication, direct messages sent in the Computer Aided Dispatch system and text messages. Other forms of communication popular in other workplaces, most notably e-mail, are not as significant at BOEC. Since BOEC operates on a 24/7 schedule an employee might send an e-mail to another employee they never see because their work shifts do

not overlap. E-mail is used for announcements but is not used for direct communication, at least on night shift, while employees are at work.

In his book *Talking Trauma* Timothy Tangherlini includes a brief section that pertains to the role of dispatchers within the paramedic company he studied. His perspective on dispatch seems to be largely influenced by his interactions with the paramedics, as he states “dispatchers rarely encounter calls that are out of the ordinary since, as medics point out, most calls are dispatched as mundane, unexceptional emergencies.”¹⁰² This obviously discounts the fact that even “mundane” calls can have a belligerent angry caller who swears at a calltaker regardless of the fact a calltaker tells the caller help is enroute. A “mundane” call for the street might not be mundane for a calltaker to process and vice versa. Tangherlini notes that “dispatchers never actually see the scene; its only visual representation is the computer-generated map with a number identifying the responding unit. In medic storytelling it is only when the medics arrive on scene that the call acquires its startling characteristics.”¹⁰³ Tangherlini’s work privileges the physical experiences of the medics. However, the inclusion of dispatch in his book seemed to function as an illustration of conflicts medics face within the company and was not actually an examination of the culture of the dispatch center. Tangherlini contrasts the sedentary description of the workplace by one of the dispatchers with the physical work of the paramedics. He gives the following description of storytelling at a 9-1-1 call center.

Unlike medics, dispatchers do not have a well-developed storytelling tradition. Perhaps because their work is highly repetitive and their environment is generally constant, dispatchers do not have the

¹⁰² Tangherlini, *Talking Trauma*, 199.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

opportunity for unique experiences. Furthermore, the dispatchers all work in the same area; they do not seek each other out during down time, nor is there any pressing need to trade stories with other dispatchers, as is the case among medics.¹⁰⁴

This may have been the case at the dispatch center Tangherlini visited and he quotes one dispatcher who says, “weird calls” don’t “stick out in my mind.”¹⁰⁵ I would argue that Tangherlini, like other occupational folklorists, imagines storytelling as something which usually occurs during down time. It is perhaps difficult to imagine the work of dispatchers, who are skilled multi-taskers, where fragmented storytelling can occur at the same time they are working. There are storytelling events at 9-1-1 call centers which occur during twenty minutes of a significant lull in work during the early hours of the morning. However, most storytelling occurs during the performance of other duties. Therefore, a visitor to a dispatch center might not see storytelling occurring face-to-face the way it does at other workplaces. Tangherlini conducted his fieldwork between 1993 and 1995. There have been significant changes in how people communicate in the workplace since then. The addition of personal cellphones has changed how many people in the field of public safety tell stories, since they can take pictures and audio recordings of scenes, citizens, callers, and suspects. Tangherlini’s assessment of dispatchers in *Talking Trauma* supports my argument that we must look at storytelling at 9-1-1 call centers, and at workplaces in general, multi-modally in order to understand how employees are telling stories even if these storytelling sessions are not occurring face-to-face during employee’s downtime.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

In the next section, one multi-modal narrative event will be examined in detail in order to illustrate the modes of communication used on the operations floor. I find it difficult to present the simultaneous nature of some of this communication in a text format. However, it is important to note before engaging with this analysis, that multi-modal communication does not only require multi-tasking physically it also requires multi-tasking the registers an employee is using to engage with others. For example, an employee might engage in the following communications simultaneously. A coach communicates with a trainee that they are frustrated through a direct message in order to explain the trainee's mistake to them. Seconds later the coach sends a message to a sergeant who is upset about the trainee's performance in direct message explaining the person dispatching is a trainee in order to lessen the damage of the trainee's mistake. At the same time the coach might turn to another coach and complain verbally about the mistake. These two sets of messages are often being typed almost simultaneously and the coach might be talking verbally while sending them. During the course of these communications the coach is still responsible for monitoring the work performance of the trainee since the communications from the officers have not ceased during this event.

From this example it is clear different registers are used simultaneously in communication about the same event. The same can be true of simultaneous conversations an employee is conducting that are not related. An employee is required to maintain different levels of professionalism in communications related to work. In vernacular conversations an employee will vary her or his tone based on their relationship to the person they are communicating with. Jokes between employees who are not friends about a mistake one employee

made will have a different tone than the jokes made by employees who are friends. It is important to note that emotional and tone multi-tasking are also occurring in multi-modal communication. Dispatchers gage their communications based on their relationship with the receiving party in the workplace hierarchy and goals of the communicative event. 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers are accustomed to taking what would be considered an upsetting call and returning to conversations about their children with the coworkers. Accordingly it is possible for employees to manage their personal expression in conversations occurring simultaneously in ways that other people might not be accustomed to, since some individuals who are not so accustomed to multi-tasking can not be as fluid and need more defined boundaries during communicative events.

9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers express multiple narrative identities simultaneously during multi-modal events. Below I present a description of one such multi-modal event in order to give the reader an understanding of how multi-modal events take place in the workplace and also how 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers express multiple narrative identities simultaneously during the course of performing these events.¹⁰⁶ Richard Bauman states “oral performance, like all human activity, is situated, its form, meaning, and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes or events—bounded segments of the flow of behavior and experience that constitute meaningful contexts for action, interpretations, and evaluation.”¹⁰⁷ Oral performance has been a significant topic for analysis

¹⁰⁶ Thank you to Dorothy Bayern for pointing this out during the public presentation of this thesis research.

¹⁰⁷ Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event*, 3.

within the field of folklore. Bauman notes that oral performance is a “bounded segment of the flow” and contemporarily this “bounded segment of the flow” also incorporates modes of communication which are not oral. In multi-modal communication oral performance is still possible but other modes of communication are also present. The previous work by folklorists on narrative is useful here as is recent research on computer-mediated communication. By placing my analysis in the foundation of research conducted by folklorists on narrative I then attempt to use current work on computer-mediated communication to draw conclusions about the performance of multi-modal narratives.

Analysis of One Multi-Modal Event

The extended description of one multi-modal event at a 9-1-1 call center will illustrate multi-modal work performance and includes a non-institutional narrative about the event by parties involved. In this section, and in the following three sections examining three different types of stories, I use composite narratives to illustrate my points. Drawing on interviews, observations in the workplace, and feedback from my coworkers on this thesis, I created these composite examples of multi-modal communication in order to demonstrate different elements of these narrative events. Due to the constraints of my IRB it was not possible to record multi-modal storytelling events in the workplace in their natural context. However, it would have been necessary to create composite stories even if I could record in the workplace in order to preserve the anonymity of callers, first responders and other coworkers. The multi-modal event presented here includes official workplace communications

about a call for service and narratives about the event while it is occurring and afterwards. In later sections I focus on multi-modal narrative events more specifically without so much of a focus on official communications in the workplace.

This multi-modal narrative begins with a caller. The caller witnesses a woman being assaulted on the street and calls 9-1-1 for a police response. A trainee receives the phone call and begins to process the call by asking for the address. There are many numbered addresses (such as those on N.E. 14th Street in certain hundred blocks), which are the same in Portland and in Gresham. In other words, the same street address can exist in Portland and Gresham, both areas covered by BOEC, and thirteen miles apart. A mistake in “line choice,” caused by lack of clarity with the caller can cause a catastrophic error in response. In this instance the trainee chooses the wrong “line choice” and starts a call for service in Portland instead of Gresham, where the event is actually occurring. The coach begins direct messaging the trainee calltaker in the computer-aided dispatch system, attempting to alert them to this problem. At the same time, another calltaker receives a call about the same problem and sends help to the correct location in Gresham. This second calltaker, who has sent help to the right place, direct messages the coach in CAD and explains help is going to the right place. At the same time, this second calltaker attempts to verbally notify the trainee calltaker of their error. However, the trainee calltaker has continued to verbally communicate with the caller and ask questions about descriptions of the suspects and does not hear the second calltaker. The coach verbally communicates with the second calltaker and tells this calltaker not to tell the trainee about their error. The coach lets the trainee calltaker proceed with their

error with the knowledge that help is going to the right place. The coach also knows the trainee has not been paying attention to their direct messages and knows the trainee is not accomplished at multi-tasking, one of the skills they must learn and demonstrate.

At this point, two different calls for service have been sent to two different dispatchers who are sitting approximately five feet from one another. But it is a Friday night and this is a common type of call, a male versus female disturbance, so the dispatchers do not hear or notice the similarities in calls, and they should not be expected to do so. At this point the calltaker's coach direct messages the North Precinct dispatcher, where the call with the bad address is being dispatched, and alerts the dispatcher to the error. At the same time the calltaking coach is repeatedly messaging their trainee trying to alert them to the problem. These are messages the trainee calltaker continues to ignore. At the same time, the North Precinct dispatcher, who is also a trainee, ignores their direct messages from the calltaking coach and dispatches the call. The dispatch coach notices the mistake and direct messages the calltaking coach to acknowledge this. In this example, both coaches are "sitting away from their trainees," separated physically from them by as much as fifteen feet. These trainees are late phase trainees. Late phase trainees have their commands and messages monitored by a program in the computer aided dispatch system that lets coaches see messages and commands from afar. Usually this is a terminal located one to six positions away, depending on the training phase of the trainee.

After the trainee calltaker has been on the line with the caller for three minutes, and ignored several messages from the coach, the coach finally yells at the trainee "Gresham... it is Gresham!" from across the room. At the same time,

the trainee at North dispatch has proceeded to dispatch the call, even as their coach is verbally telling them not to. The trainee calltaker finishes the call, and hangs up with the caller after finally getting the correct address, they note the text of the call it is at the wrong location. The text of the call for service is a different entity than direct messaging. The text of a call for service is bounded by the call "mask," or format where calltakers and dispatchers enter information pertaining to one incident. Direct messages are separate and stand alone, even direct messages of conversations between the same two dispatch terminals. Afterwards, the trainee calltaker's coach walks across the room to have a verbal conversation with the trainee about the error. On the radios, the dispatcher has called officers and sent them to the call with the inaccurate address. Before ending the call with the caller, the calltaking trainee has added information to the call to service indicating this is a bad address and the call is actually in Gresham. The dispatch trainee should have noticed this and canceled the call, but still proceeded with dispatch. While dispatching units, the police sergeant monitoring North precinct radio traffic notices the text in the call for service indicating it is a bad address.

While the trainee dispatcher is talking on the radio, the trainee dispatcher's coach is messaging the original trainee calltaker and the trainee calltaker's coach in the computer aided dispatch system confirming they know it is a canceled call for service. This coach has also chosen to let their trainee continue down an erroneous path as a learning experience. The two officers dispatched on the call are sitting next to each other in their cars on the street. While they are dispatched, they have a verbal conversation about the call since they also notice the text in the call for service indicating it is not in the correct city.

While the dispatcher is giving them the information over the radio, the sergeant keys his radio. He proceeds, rather irritably, to inform the trainee dispatcher of their error. The trainee dispatcher clears the call and turns to their coach to have a verbal discussion about the error. The calltaking trainee's coach happens to personally know one of the officers who were dispatched on the call for service in the wrong city. The officer sends the coach a text message in their personal cellphone referencing the sergeant's treatment of the dispatch trainee on the air. The calltaker's coach and the police officer proceed to discuss the error and have a venting session about trainees in general over personal text message. After receiving a direct CAD message from the dispatch trainee's coach referencing the same angry sergeant on the radio, the calltaking trainee's coach calls the sergeant using the official work phone system to apologize for the mix-up. The coach explains this incident was intended to instruct both trainees and both coaches were aware of the mistake. Furthermore, the coach explains they made sure a call for service was going to the correct place since while this entire incident was occurring officers had responded to the right address in Gresham. After the incident is over, both coaches exchange personal text messages about the incident. Later the text message discussion is cut short by other calls, so they continue it in person verbally in order to debrief about what occurred.

During the course of this incident multiple modes of communication were utilized. The institutional phone systems were used by the caller, and also when the calltaker's coach called the sergeant. Non-institutional phone systems, namely the cell phones of the employees, were used to communicate about the event outside of official contexts. Direct messaging in the computer aided dispatch system was the most frequently used method of communication. Verbal

communication and radio-mediated communication were also used. This incident displays the spectrum of communication modes available to 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers. Much of the communication in this incident was related to workplace duties. However, the two coaches also had a text message and verbal conversation about the incident after it was completed. One coach and an officer also share narratives about the event and debrief about it. Furthermore, there might have been other narrative events which occurred after this event. The two trainees might discuss their errors in cautionary tales about address choice and not watching your messages. Other workers in the room might talk about the coach who yelled at their trainee and “vent” about how annoying it is when coaches yell at their trainees across the operations floor. This entire incident occurred over the space of five minutes, from start to finish, and much of the communication was simultaneous. The direct message system in computer aided dispatch allows for stacked messages, which means multiple conversations can be referenced simultaneously. This somewhat complicated but typical example gives the reader insight into the complexity of work related activities at a 9-1-1 call center. Multi-tasking is a key feature of good workplace performance. This ability to multi-task extends into storytelling events as well. With this example in mind we will continue into an analysis of multi-modal storytelling events and their purpose in the workplace.

The earlier sections on venting sessions, first-time stories and cautionary stories all include quotes taken from formal interviews. These quotes include examples of oral storytelling events or transcriptions of the events themselves, including a venting session, recorded on tape outside of the workplace. The restrictions of the three different types of narratives I looked at were imposed by

me, in my role as a researcher. When I continued my analysis into storytelling by examining storytelling events multi-modally there is a different level of depth to the stories we don't see in these three quotes taken from my formal interviews with coworkers. These three narrative events still exist multi-modally but illustrate the possible disasters and outcomes of one mistake in the manipulation of a computer command. The strictly oral narratives demonstrate relationships with traumatic events or frustrations, but they look different in the controlled realm of the formal interview. Through a multi-modal examination of these storytelling additional elements of their significance will be uncovered. They also serve as an example of how communication in the workplace has evolved to include multi-modal communication.

Multi-Modal Cautionary Stories

Contemporary research on computer-mediated communication often focuses strictly on online performances or on how computer mediated communication is happening in multiple realms, but rarely on the social and cultural ramifications of this practice. Consequently, it is applicable to draw on the research of folklorists who have studied oral performance and find instances in which their work is also relevant when thinking about computer mediated and multi-modal forms of communication and narrative events.

Cautionary stories are often told multi-modally. Earlier in this thesis the nature and functions of cautionary stories were examined in terms of how they serve several purposes within the workplace. Employees must frame these narratives in order to understand communications that extend these stories through multiple modes of communication. Although the necessity of

distinguishing frames of communication is necessary in venting sessions and first-time stories, the necessity is most relevant in the case of cautionary stories. Bauman's distinction between narrative frames and literal frames, which he argues might not even be an actual type of oral performance since people so infrequently are only speaking literally, allows for the inclusion of exaggeration and lying without discrediting the function of a narrative.¹⁰⁸ In the case of multi-modal cautionary tales exaggeration might exist alongside official communication about work. In all multi-modal narratives we must consider the frame of the narrative event encompassing the event even as it moves through multiple modes of communication. Furthermore, in the analysis of cautionary tales, we must consider that the frame of the story distinguishes the story from other official workplace communications at a 9-1-1 call center. Official communications rely on accurately portraying "facts" to the best of a calltaker or dispatcher's ability, but vernacular narratives do not always require some degree of factual information.

Multi-modal cautionary stories are expressed with the intent to share knowledge with other employees about the negative outcomes of possible errors. They are told among certified employees in order to illustrate important knowledge that should be shared with other employees. These stories also pass on knowledge to trainees and less senior employees. Multi-modal cautionary stories are often shared between coach and trainee. For example, a coach who is sitting away from their trainee might begin a narrative verbally at the end of a call. If they are sitting several terminals away from their trainee, after their trainee is finished talking to a caller the coach might tell a story of a similar

¹⁰⁸ Bauman, *Verbal Art as Performance*, 9.

mistake the coach once made and its ramifications. However, the verbal story could be interrupted by a call coming into the trainee's line on 9-1-1. The coach then must finish the story in a direct message to the trainee which shows up in the trainees screen while they process the new 9-1-1 call. In response, the trainee might message the coach back and acknowledges the message after they are done processing the new call. Later in the shift, the coach and trainee team might leave the operations floor to take a break and take up the verbal discussion of the topic and related experiences once more. A cautionary story could be told verbally only; or it could be expressed only through direct message, depending on the intricacy of the story. It could also be a combination of both verbal and direct messaging. However, the workplace environment often has multiple communicative events occurring at the same time. Consequently trainees and coaches who must communicate frequently throughout a work shift often rely on multi-modal communication to discuss incidents. Coaches often share cautionary stories multi-modally throughout the shift in order to impress certain techniques or skills upon a trainee. Because the training team must continue to work and keep up with the pace of the workflow, the workplace necessitates multi-modal communication and multi-modal storytelling.

The narrative of a cautionary story will often exist alongside official communications about work and other narratives. Bauman writes the following concerning oral narrative performance. "In other words, in artistic performance of this kind, there is something going on in the communicative interchange which says to the auditor, 'interpret what I say in some special sense; do not take it to mean what the words alone, taken literally, would convey.'" This may lead to the further suggestion that performance sets up, or represents, an interpretative

frame within which the messages being communicated are to be understood, and that this frame contrasts with at least one other frame, the literal.”¹⁰⁹ Bauman goes on to point out that contrasting a performance frame with a literal frame neglects to illustrate that there are many different verbal frames, including quotation and joking.¹¹⁰ He concludes, “for our purposes, all that is necessary is the recognition of performance as a distinctive frame, available as a communicative resource along with the others to speakers in particular communities.”¹¹¹ Performance of narratives exists alongside other frames of communication at a 9-1-1 call center, most notably official communications about work related activities. Furthermore, the frame of the narrative continues throughout modes of communication. Official communication about calls for service exists alongside stories about workplace events. The pathway of the frame of narrative performance surrounds a direct message that continues a narrative even if the direct message about a narrative event is visually adjacent to an official communication about work related activities. The frame of a narrative event is what allows for the continuation of a narrative between multiple modes of communication even when there are breaks in the mode of communication.

During interviews my coworkers gave examples of the types of stories they told, which included cautionary stories. When they discussed certain events, they would include references to direct messages they sent in CAD and forms of communication that did not include verbal communication like texting in their personal cellphones. In practice, when stories are told in the workplace they

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 11.

often include multi-modal elements. For cautionary stories a coach and trainee might not be able to finish a discussion because of the number of 9-1-1 calls holding to be answered. It is common to pause a story or simply finish the end of a story through messaging. Two senior dispatchers might not want to tell a cautionary story verbally, especially if it is about another dispatcher getting in trouble in the workplace, so they would direct message part of the story in CAD and finish an otherwise inappropriate part of the story in text messaging through the use of personal cell phones. Ruth Finnegan, in her book *Communicating*, argues all forms of communication are multi-modal. She states that certain communicative processes, like oral performance, which have often been thought to be unimodal are in fact multi-modal. Stories, speeches, and poems she says, “seem on the face of it single-mode genres, utilizing the auditory-verbal channel, and this indeed is how they have often been analysed. But once they are considered as active processes, their multidimensional nature becomes obvious.”¹¹² Even oral storytelling includes “auditory, kinesic, visual, participatory,” and perhaps olfactory elements.¹¹³ If oral storytelling has multiple modes of expression, is the continuation of the same story in multi-modal forms of communication simply an extension of a practice which is already multi-modal? An examination of multi-modal features of oral narratives encourages us to think about any multi-modal narratives as an active process. Multi-modal communication, illustrated through the example of cautionary stories, requires us to examine a pathway of communication framed by the narrative event occurring.

¹¹² Finnegan, *Communicating*, 226.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

In the case of cautionary stories, continuing a story multi-modally is often a matter of convenience. Calls that need to be processed keep coming in and transmissions on the radio at dispatch need to be attended to. Unlike other storytelling events, like venting sessions that might not require a conclusion to convey the desired effect, the conclusion and outcome of events in a cautionary story is where the effect of the story is conveyed. Therefore finishing the story is necessary even if this cannot occur verbally. Cautionary stories are a particular example of a genre of story present at a 9-1-1 call center and a type of story which must be completed in order to be effective. Lisa Ochs and Elinor Capps examine linearity in their study *Living Narrative*. Ochs and Capps consider linearity in the context of “everyday” storytelling events. “While all narratives of personal experience organize events in terms of time and causality, they do not uniformly thread events into a unilinear time line and cause-effect progression. The dimension of *linearity* concerns the extent to which narratives of personal experience depict events as transpiring in a single, closed, temporal, and casual path or, alternatively, in diverse, open, uncertain paths.”¹¹⁴ Linear progression refers to the sequence of events within the story and how the narrator chooses to express this sequence.

Constant interruptions and changes in modes of communication at a 9-1-1 call center impact the linear progression of stories. This is true of all stories and not just cautionary stories. However, cautionary stories illustrate the importance of completing the flow of the narrative for 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers even if constant interruptions occur and hamper the telling of a story. Ochs and Capps also state “the dimension of linearity lies at the heart of the tension that drives

¹¹⁴ Ochs and Capps, *Living Narrative*, 41.

human beings to tell narratives of personal experience. On the one hand, tellers seek the clarity and coherence that linearity offers.”¹¹⁵ They continue by asserting, “humans are questioning beings . . . nonlinear narration opens narration to multiple truths and perspectives and realization that certain life experiences resist tidy, ready-at-hand interpretive frameworks.”¹¹⁶ In the case of cautionary stories, tellers of these stories will take steps through multi-modal communication, and take multiple attempts at finishing the story in spite of interruptions, in order to resolve the narrative. Ochs and Capps are speaking about nonlinear narration in the context of speech but their analysis helps us understand multi-modal narration. Finishing such a narrative, even if the linearity of the story is impacted by multi-modal narration, leaves the story open for interpretation by the listener. Especially in the case presented earlier, nonlinear narration and finishing the story in spite of interruptions leaves space for interpretation on the part of the trainee. Furthermore, it illustrates the importance of these particular stories since some stories at a 9-1-1 call center go unfinished or portions of the story are not heard by certain listeners in group storytelling events.

In this thesis, cautionary stories serve as an example of how and why stories become multi-modal. In this case it is often out of a necessity to finish the story or have the story obscured from institutional control. Calltakers and dispatchers are including computer mediated communication into their storytelling in order to achieve this goal. However, multi-modal cautionary stories also signal why multi-modal stories are important at a 9-1-1 call center.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Analysis of recorded interviews shows these interviews do not often contain references to the detail oriented work 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers must do. Cautionary stories told multi-modally in the workplace do include these details. In my research multi-modal venting sessions are the best place to examine this theme of dispatcher and calltaker communication. Furthermore, first-time tales illustrate why and how dispatchers and calltakers incorporate the use of computer-mediated communication into their narratives and the impact the structures of these systems have on their narratives.

Multi-Modal First Time Stories

First-time tales illustrate the methods dispatchers and calltakers incorporate with the use of computer-mediated communication into their narratives and the impact the structure of these computer-mediated systems have on these narratives. The example of cautionary stories demonstrates how the structure of the work at a 9-1-1 call center, with ebbs and flows of varying radio traffic and call volume, impacts the multi-modality of storytelling. Nonlinear storytelling is significant in many narrative events at a 9-1-1 call center. Even when just two people are talking, one or more of the participants will be drawn away to attend to work related business during the course of a narrative. First-time stories are exemplary of two elements of storytelling at a 9-1-1 call center. First, they illustrate how the structure of the CAD, and other formats used for communication like personal cellphones, impact the nature of storytelling events. They are also significant examples of Susan Kalčík's theory of narrative kernel stories. First-time stories can be used to demonstrate how computer systems or the structure of the device used to perform a specific mode of

communication and how it impacts the way a story is told. By identifying narrative kernels in first-time tales we can reach a better understanding of how 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers interpret their work through narrative.

As discussed previously in this thesis, trainees often share first-time stories between one another. Other certified employees also exchange first-time stories. Similar to some first-time stories that are told verbally, first-time stories that are told multi-modally often focus on very specific details of an event. When trainees exchange stories about first-time events they might focus on their “small” errors during the course of the incident. When a trainee discusses her or his first traffic pursuit, for instance, instead of focusing on the overall impression of the incident or how the incident impacted the outside world, they often will focus on the errors they made during the incident. This is partly because of the training process and focus at BOEC. Trainees have their every move monitored during training. Every error is pointed out whether it is a major incident or a routine call. Reviewing errors helps a trainee build an understanding of what they could have done better to improve their job performance. A trainee can build skills out of any kind of incident which will help them approach the next similar incident and handle it successfully. When the pursuit is over their coach points out their status keeping errors, moments where they should or should not have talked, information the trainee missed and any number of other issues with the call for service. Trainees must then reincorporate this new knowledge into their work practice.

When a trainee discusses a first-time event with another trainee, like a traffic pursuit, they usually recount elements of the incident they thought went well and provide a brief description of the overall incident. They recall mistakes

they noticed or mistakes their coach pointed out to them after the fact. Their first-time story about a traffic pursuit might include a description of a “small” error they made. For example, they might have shown an officer’s status and location to be “15/burnside” street instead of “154/burnside” street. This is a mistake of one digit. However, this one digit is a difference of 139 blocks. The reader might think the trainee could then infer the officer was at “154/burnside” in spite of the error. But is the officer at “156/burnside” or “157/burnside”? If a dispatcher’s status is not correct they do not know for sure and omitting one digit means the trainee doesn’t know either. As a result, when the officer requests medical response or asks for another officer to cover them the trainee does not know where to send the right help. This example illustrates the compounding nature of “small” errors and missing one keystroke that may ultimately result in a potentially dangerous situation.

A multi-modal first-time story might begin orally. A trainee recounts her or his general impression of the event with another trainee in the break room. Afterwards messages between the trainees in CAD further develop examples of the “small” errors made during the incident. An exchange about similar errors that both trainees have made might continue when the event is referenced several weeks later during classroom training. Often first-time stories, like other stories at a 9-1-1 call center, focus on the meticulous details of calltaking and dispatching and not on overarching themes of trauma or gender dynamics in the workplace.

First-time stories often reference errors made when manipulating CAD along with other elements of job performance such as speaking on the radio or coordinating with another coworker. Therefore, first-time stories are an

applicable type of narrative at a 9-1-1 call center to discuss how the structure of CAD impacts multi-modal narrative events which occur partially through the CAD. In her consideration of multi-modal communication, Finnegan approaches it from a perspective that all communication, even that which is often thought of as unimodal, is multimodal:

It is not just a matter of 'sensory channels' if we interpret that term in the narrow sense of the body's perceptual and transmissive capacities. There is also the remarkable human facility to draw human-created material objects into their modes of interconnecting. This runs through human communicating at every level, from the artefactual constructing of the human body to the visual arts of writing... their significance, even their existence, is often obscured by the influential mentalist models of communication or, paralleling this, by the assumption that using 'material objects' is somehow artificial and secondary in human communicating.¹¹⁷

Finnegan goes on to stress that in some instances performance might appear almost unimodal, or a society might stress one mode of communication in a specific instance, but "sometimes multiple mixed strands are developed" in one form of narrative.¹¹⁸ Even performance that is perceived of as unimodal, like oral narration, incorporates multi-modal elements. In the case of multi-modal communication at a 9-1-1 call center incorporating 'material objects' into the communicative process is often necessary to finish a narrative event.

There are certain narratives dispatchers and calltakers are willing to conduct in CAD but because CAD is a public record, all of the messages shared in this system could be seen by the public. There is a possibility an attorney or citizen pulling the records might see conversations in CAD. More importantly the messages from any dispatch or calltaking terminal can be viewed by anyone on the operations floor. Therefore having a sensitive conversation about another

¹¹⁷ Finnegan, *Communicating*, 235.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

coworker or an emotional event is not usually conducted in CAD. CAD is an easy form of communication in since dispatchers and calltakers are already using the computer to conduct work related business. Therefore personal conversations can be mixed in with work related business. The ease of communication through CAD means that many conversations will move into this realm especially if they are not sensitive or emotional in nature. Proximity on the operations floor also means that verbal communication is a possibility. However, since work-related matters must be attended to immediately, talking verbally is not always easy. This method of communication is not recorded, when it is not on the phones or on the radio, so it is more private if a worker whispers to the worker next to them. As mentioned, texting in personal cellphones is another significant mode of communication in the workplace since supervisors or management at BOEC does not monitor it. Private portions of conversations can occur by way of cellphones but this mode of communication is sometimes difficult to accomplish. If the work pace is extremely busy, picking up a cellphone and texting is not always possible. Beyond this the actual communication structure of texting has limitations. There are limits on the amount of characters you can type in CAD and text messages. There are also social limits on the number of messages it is appropriate to send when another coworker is working.

Drawing “human-created material objects into their modes of interconnecting” is possible at a 9-1-1 call center because 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers are skilled at multi-tasking. They use institutional modes of communication, like CAD, to share personal conversations with one another. They also use noninstitutional modes of communication, like their cellphones, to

discuss more subversive or provocative subject matter. In the case of multi-modal first-time tales more emotional elements of stories can be saved for later verbal communication. Trainees who are discussing performance-related details of first time stories can analyze these events in CAD direct messaging because of the easy of communication in this platform. Although the exact structure of each of these modes of communication could also be treated in more detail, it is significant that first-time stories continue through all modes of communication at a 9-1-1 call center and these stories are referenced using narrative kernels after the event as well.

Susan Kalčík developed her concept of a kernel story after examining personal narratives in women's rap groups connected with Women's Liberation groups. Kalčík had difficulty deciding what to call the stories she was analyzing and eventually chose "story or personal narrative" since that is what the women she showed the data called the collected material. She also felt she had to struggle with the folk belief that women "could not tell good stories." "The two problems, which suggest that women cannot tell stories and that what women do tell are not real stories, lead me to conclude that some women's stories are not structured in ways that have been commonly studied."¹¹⁹ She identifies kernel stories, a recurrent narrative type among the women she studied, which are brief references to "the subject, the central action, or an important piece of dialogue from a longer story."¹²⁰ She notes the fluid structure of a kernel story and that kernels can be referenced without developing into kernel stories. The story might

¹¹⁹ Kalčík, "Personal Narratives in Women's Rap Groups," 7.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

develop, depending on the narrators desire to develop it or questions from a listener. At a 9-1-1 call center kernel stories are a significant mode of referencing events. Earlier, in the section on disembodied trauma, I reference a story which would be classified as a first-time call. In the course of a dialogue I say, “but then too, I had those, those parents drown their eight year old daughter or whatever.” No further details are offered other than this one line reference. Often first-time stories that are traumatic in nature will be referenced as kernel stories. The narrator might develop the outcome of the story, or what they learned from the event or felt afterwards. However, the full nature and details of the call are referenced using narrative kernels. This is true when more extreme first-time tales are shared verbally or multi-modally. Kalčík concludes “kernel stories are emergent structures... the climax or point of the story can shift from telling to telling; different parts of the story, events or details, can be foregrounded to make the story suit the point the narrator wishes to make.”¹²¹ In a multi-modal first-time story a more upsetting element of the story is downplayed in order to coincide with the modes of communication. If a dispatcher gets more time later in the evening, they can reference the incident verbally and develop more emotional elements of the narrative. Kalčík concludes her article by wondering if narrative kernels are present only in women’s stories. I would argue they are present in 9-1-1 dispatcher’s stories even if the dispatchers are male. Multi-modal first-time stories illustrate the impact of the method of communication on the narrative event. They also illustrate that 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers reference calls for service and events using brief statements to refer to the call such as “my gorge call” or “the Sellwood bridge call.” Although 9-1-1

¹²¹ Ibid., 8.

dispatchers and calltakers often claim to “forget calls as soon as they happen” frequent references to kernel stories in my interviews illustrate forgetting is not as prevalent as many dispatchers and calltakers claim.

Multi-Modal Venting Sessions

Multi-modal venting sessions comprise a significant portion of narrative events at a 9-1-1 call center. Dispatchers and calltakers have the physical proximity to talk verbally but often do not have the open verbal space among the other talking they must do for work, to first responders and callers, to speak to one another. Coaches also “sit behind” their trainees in phases two and three, meaning they do not have their hands on a keyboard. This means that in order to communicate a coach would have to speak verbally or via text message to vent about an officer, a caller or even the trainee they are sitting with. Venting in text message often includes knowing looks exchanged between dispatchers or messages in CAD telling another person to turn to their cellphone for further information. The structure of the workplace means workers on the operations floor can overhear other conversations going on around them but not always engage in the conversation. For example, a worker may send a direct message in CAD to comment on a conversation they overhear so they do not have to shout across the operations floor.

The structure of multi-modal venting sessions is fluid and these sessions adapt to the current needs of the workplace. If three dispatchers are talking and radio traffic is slow almost all of a venting session will occur verbally. Only the final portion will take place in direct message in CAD if one of the dispatchers missed the ending to a story because transmissions on their dispatch net became

more frequent. Like other multi-modal stories, multi-modal venting sessions often revolve around small details of the work dispatchers and calltakers perform. Unlike stories which are retold often enough they primarily become verbal-only narratives, multi-modal venting sessions are linked to recent occurrences. Verbal venting sessions often center around larger management decisions and ingrained policy problems. Multi-modal venting sessions focus around the present. The precipitating event of the venting session usually occurred on the same shift as the conversation. Although stories shared in the venting session might come from previous experiences or other time periods, the start of the venting session is usually linked to a recent occurrence.

As an example, a common venting session might begin with a dispatcher yelling at their computer as if the computer were an officer who just made a rude transmission. To be clearer, the officer is rude to the dispatcher over the radio. The dispatcher responds, without keying their microphone which would transmit their words over the radio, by yelling at the computer as if they were responding to the officer. They might comment on how the officer was a “fucking idiot” or a “fucking asshole” or another similar type of statement often including an expletive. Some dispatchers yell and others might mutter at the computer screen. Other dispatchers do not typically engage in this behavior at all, although most people have done this at least once or twice in my observations. These outbursts are accepted on the floor although there are social restrictions on how often it is acceptable for an employee to engage in them. After the transmissions on the radio are complete a dispatcher would turn to another dispatcher in the “police pod” and tell them the entirety of the frustrating events. Other dispatchers in the “police pod” can hear the dispatcher yelling but cannot

hear what the officer is saying. Although dispatchers can play-back the offending transmission on a recorder a verbal explanation of what happened is more common.

This explanation will most likely prompt the second dispatcher to respond with a similar story about the offending officer or an example of a similar type of experience. If several dispatchers get to talking about this incident the dispatcher staffing NET8, or servicedesk, would then overhear the conversation. The NET8 dispatcher is usually out of comfortable speaking range from the other police dispatchers. The NET8 dispatcher, in joining the conversation, might then send a direct message to the original dispatcher in CAD explaining a similar experience they had with the same officer. At the same time, the original dispatcher could be dispatching a call to officers over the radio while they receive messages from the NET8 dispatcher. While this is happening the other dispatchers engaged in the verbal conversation will continue talking. It is not considered rude to continue talking if someone has to turn away from the conversation in order to perform work duties. Once the first dispatcher finishes their transmission they return to the verbal conversation, having missed a ninety-second segment of it, yet without asking for a repeat of the information shared while they were performing work duties. Unlike cautionary stories, missing information in venting sessions is not crucial to narrative success. The NET8 dispatcher might have only overheard segments of what was being said but they can still participate and understand the kernels of the ongoing conversations. Although the original dispatcher may miss parts of the conversation, he or she is still able to jump back in without needing a recap. Some stories, like humorous stories about calls that require continuity to understand the events, might require the

narrator to return to a topic which was covered for most of the group with part of the group was working. This is not always necessary in venting sessions although a “repeat” will be offered if requested.

In her discussion of the significance of personal experience stories, Barbara Allen notes “telling personal experience stories, while governed interactionally by a number of delicate and complex constraints, requires no specialized or esoteric knowledge; anyone can and, if socially competent, does tell such stories.”¹²² She says that their meaning depends on the context of the storytelling session and therefore personal experience narratives have had less relevance as collected texts. Because personal experience narratives do not require esoteric knowledge, these types of stories as told by dispatchers and calltakers in venting sessions could be told to members of the general public or first responders. However, understanding from other community members is what motivates dispatchers and calltakers to tell stories to one another. Often the types of minor details, like attention to slight vocal changes from officers that indicate they have been rude, would not have the same meaning for individuals who are not dispatchers. The details of work and minor incidents which are often treated in multi-modal venting sessions are shared within the workplace because workers do not perceive them to be significant enough to share with people who would not understand them. In her essay Allen asserts that in personal experience narratives, the choices the narrator makes shape “the story into something more than a news account.” The narrator shapes it rhetorically “so that the telling of the experience in that particular form will indicate to the audience some of the meaning of the original experience for the narrator, his or her attitude toward

¹²² Allen, “Personal Experience Narratives,” 237.

why it is being recounted at this point in the conversation.”¹²³ For example, the narrator might explicitly state the reason they are telling the story. When dispatchers and calltakers are venting with other dispatchers and calltakers they draw out the details they know will be understood. The relevance of venting sessions relies on drawing out these details and participation from other employees. Employees who yell at computers and those around them without engaging other employees violate the social norms of workplace behavior.

Secondary playbacks of recorded media are sometimes possible at 9-1-1 call centers. There is a recording device called a Spilsbury that allows dispatchers to play back a missed radio transmission. This is typically used for work related purposes so a dispatcher can check and make sure they heard the correct address or information given by a first responder. However, as I mentioned above, a dispatcher can also play back a funny transmission by an officer or a rude transmission by an officer. A statement like “can you believe what he just said” precedes the playback of the recorded transmission. This occurs when there is slow radio traffic but this type of playback is not always possible. Playbacks on the Spilsbury come out of a speaker and dispatchers within three feet of the device can hear the playback. At calltaking, a calltaker can summon over another employee and have them listen to a humorous call or a particularly angry caller. Multi-modal venting might also include these methods of recording. As dispatchers and calltakers emphasize their points and frustrations with these recordings in this way dispatchers and calltakers utilize institutionally created recordings of their work to engage in narratives questioning the behavior of the officer or caller on the other end of the radio or phone. I have not mentioned

¹²³ Allen, “Personal Experience Narratives,” 241.

firefighters or paramedics in this section since their radio protocol typically means they are not rude on the radio to the extent officers are.

Multi-modal venting does not require these playbacks but dispatchers and calltakers have access to this media. Pictures and videos that are text messaged from officers are also shown alongside the retelling of stories. These pictures often highlight the significance of a story since dispatchers have sought information on the other side of the call. One example, from my experience, is a photograph of an exploding appliance which shows the damage this exploding appliance did after dispatchers and calltakers did not originally believe it was as bad as the caller said. This type of media incorporation typically involves a calltaker or dispatcher seeking out information from a first responder on the street to add to their performance of a story. It also requires some type of personal relationship since the mode of transmitting these photos is through personal cellphone communications. In venting sessions recordings usually highlight the negative aspects of the behavior the dispatcher or calltaker experienced. They also illustrate “can you believe this caller said this” stories and “this first responder is an idiot stories.”

Ultimately members of management view venting sessions and other behaviors in the workplace to be examples of how dispatchers and calltakers complain too much. After examining these multi-modal venting sessions, other multi-modal narrative events and storytelling in the workplace in general, I would argue this is not the case. When I began this project I expected to find a great deal of stories referencing trauma and conflicts regarding social hierarchy in the workplace. Although these topics are present, and are referenced in the stories and quotes I have included, many narratives centered on an entirely

different topic. Often dispatchers and calltakers are talking about “little things” and “small details.” They focus on what outsiders, and management, might consider small aspects of their work. However this is a reflection of what working for 9-1-1 is about. It is about taking traumatic life changing events and turning them into a one hundred word call for service in a preformatted call mask in CAD. It is about doing this correctly, every time, to perfection, and not missing a detail. This is what dispatchers and calltakers talk about and it is what they “vent” about to one another. Their work is under such microscopic scrutiny it is clear that creative responses also reflect this outwardly whether with allied disciplines or callers. But then one must ask: how fulfilling are those venting sessions? Do they bring about closure for the issues I discussed earlier such as problematic gender dynamics and trauma? Most likely they do not, especially when they are occurring multi-modally since the workplace does not often give ample space to work through these overarching issues in narrative. However, venting sessions and narratives in general are more valid than management might assume and do often point out problems with the workplace that illustrate spaces for improvement. One might also reasonably argue that if management listened to some venting sessions and attempted to understand them, they might not have to pay outside contractors large sums to try and figure out what is wrong with our workplace.

CHAPTER IX

CONCLUSIONS

In his ethnographic account of the culture of mushrooming, Gary Alan Fine describes the role narratives play in that community: "Much talk in any group focuses on the group's explicit interests. Personal narrative is a means of dealing with collective concerns. In one sense, this is instrumental talk-talk aimed at the achievement of the group's formal goal. Yet frequently in voluntary groups expressive and instrumental components of group life merge. Expressive concerns are instrumental in voluntary groups; talk is often as satisfying as the action itself."¹²⁴ I would argue this is also true in groups that are not voluntary. Talk can be as satisfying as the action itself. In the case of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers, talk and other forms of communication can substitute for an action that should not be taken. Venting about an officer's snide remark to other coworkers can stand in for actually making the snide remark to the officer. Nonetheless, like voluntary groups, groups formed out of necessity like occupational groups also have a merging of expressive and instrumental group goals. Personal narratives may deal with the collective concerns of members a group; however, in non-voluntary groups the collective concerns also rub up against the concerns of other collective groups.

Studs Terkel's book *Working* contains the following description from a stewardess named Terry Mason who details her relationship to her profession, in reference to an emergency she had to deal with. "So I thought, I can't die. When I got on the intercom, I was so calm. Also we're supposed to keep a smile on our

¹²⁴ Fine, *Morel Tales*, 138.

face. Even during an emergency, you're supposed to walk through the cabin and make everybody feel comfortable with a smile."¹²⁵ The roles of 9-1-1 dispatchers and flight attendants are similar to some extent. Both professions manage relationships with the public. They also manage relationships with male-dominated professions (pilots and first responders), while their profession is either historically or contemporarily perceived to be female-dominated. Both professions also balance attending to emergencies while also being responsible for providing good customer service and exhibiting politeness and professionalism. In workplaces requiring computer-mediated communication, narratives develop along similar boundaries between different professions who frequently interact with one another. The tensions between what is required of workers, what they require of themselves, and what the standards of the community of workers represent the boundaries along which narratives arise. This means that workplaces, which increasingly incorporate computer-mediated forms of communication, will see the management of these concerns occurring in face-to-face communication and also through computer-mediated means. The case of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers is particular but also demonstrates a larger issue concerning how workers structure their communication about work even when it is not specifically communication performed to do work. Computer-mediated narratives in the workplace challenge the idea that expression in the workplace occurs during breaks and downtime as occupational folklorists have previously argued.

In this thesis, I have drawn upon the scholarship by folklorists on a variety of topics, including crime victim narratives, the experiences of domestic violence

¹²⁵ Terkel, *Working*, 48.

victims, and research on occupational culture, such as the dynamics of the work environment for flight attendants and medics, as well as the complex social relationships of the kitchen, in order to present a foundation for understanding the narratives of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers in the context of previous research. I have also drawn on the work that folklorists have conducted on narratives in order to understand how occupational narratives, which have often been central to understanding the culture of an occupation, are changing due to computer-mediated communication. Although the culture of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers has never been studied to my knowledge, the analysis of their workplace narratives demonstrates many parallels to previous work by folklorists, by illustrating how a workplace is structured by the communication workers engage in. This thesis contributes to the ongoing study of occupational folklore and has examined a group defined by their relationship through their occupation to further discussion within the field of folklore studies about the role of computer-mediated communication in narrative.

The Future of Occupational Folklore

After conducting this research I discovered Holly Everett's entry on occupational folklore in the *Encyclopedia of Women's Folklore and Folklife*, published in 2009, which states the following:

emerging issues for folklorists working in this area include the use of technologically enabled networks, as more and more employees work from home and participate in non-traditional work configurations such as job sharing; the proliferation of occupations that enlist or originate in Internet technologies means that shared physical space no longer defines work space. Thus, folkloric communication—for example, jokes, chain letters, occupational-experience narratives, rumors and gossip—is often

transmitted by e-mail, sometimes over vast distances, rather than face-to-face.¹²⁶

As this observation makes clear, the changing structures of employment means that folklorists will not be able to study bounded communities—like McCarl, Green and Jones did—in the same way occupational folklore has been studied in the past. The 9-1-1 workplace I have discussed is more similar to that of McCarl’s firefighters than many workplaces are since it is bounded by a professional status and highly rigorous training process. While my research does challenge the boundaries of communication, the boundaries of the profession I examine are similar to that identified by previous occupational folklorists. But, folklorists also need to extend their studies to less professionalized forms of employment and consider underrepresented groups and groups with less cohesive bonds.

In her entry, Everett also notes “ethnographies of corporate call centers, for instance, also remain to be done.”¹²⁷ This thesis has attempted to address this void in the scholarship. Call centers, and other workplaces, are venues folklorists can begin their examination of multi-modal communication both within the workplace and in the functions of the job performed. Although the multi-modal communication at a 9-1-1 call center might be unique to that profession, 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers still have a noticeable amount of privilege in comparison to non-union workers, many under valued professions and women’s labor in general. As I have discussed, multi-modal narratives demonstrate a relationship with the repeated stresses and traumas of the work performed at a 9-1-1 call center, manifesting fears about minor errors and the detail-oriented

¹²⁶ Everett, “Occupational Folklore,” 451.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 452.

nature of the work. When listening to someone assault someone else on the phone “isn’t a big deal anymore,” at least when dispatchers and calltakers talk about their work with each other, there are still concerns about how the work is performed that is relevant to narratives. Future research on occupational folklore should address the issue of multi-modal communication and the concerns expressed through these communicative forms. In the case of my coworkers, and ultimately myself, it was not until I looked at narratives multi-modally that I was able to see the deeper concerns they expressed.

Folklorists must begin to look at narratives and expressive communication that are computer-mediated, but that does not necessarily exist solely online or as computer-mediated communication. Workplace narratives can have multiple communicative layers. During my formal interviews dispatchers and calltakers exchange stories about calls, other coworkers and other public safety workers when I was asking them more direct questions about the workplace structure. The fragmented nature of a 9-1-1 dispatcher or calltaker’s relationship to these experiences is evident when details are missing from the story or pieced together since dispatchers and calltakers can only get some of the details through the phone or radios. But we don’t talk about their relationship to how we narrate or interact with the call in the moment the call is occurring or at the moment of the incident’s creation. When we examine the practice of multi-modal communication, we see that some of it is influenced by the structure of the workplace—such as all messages in the computer aided dispatch program being accessible to supervisors, other coworkers and the general public, which limits what one might say, in situations of frustration for instance. Similar to some of the research done on online communities, research into how narratives occur in

occupational settings should include the analysis of the structure of the computing program, or technology in general, being used to construct and perform the narrative event. In the case of a 9-1-1 call center the structure of the physical workplace, proximity to other workers and the location of calltaking positions enroute to the bathroom, structures how narratives are told. Equally influential is the structure of the computer program being used. Whether future studies into occupational folklore focus on narratives or not, analysis of most workplaces in Western society and indeed many other places as well should include an analysis of how technology is incorporated into that specific occupational community. This requires increased interdisciplinary work with other fields that focus on communication and the philosophical implications of multi-modal communication in general.

Intersection of Narratives with Multi-Modal Communication

As I have demonstrated in this study we must also consider that ways certain communities communicate through computers and also have face-to-face incidents of communication. These pathways of communication must be analyzed in order to fully understand the implications of communication in workplaces. Such narratives are sometimes examples of metacommunication, as characterized by folklorist Barbara Babcock: "Metacommunication in narrative performance may be described as any element of communication which calls attention to the speech event as a performance and to the relationship which obtains between the narrator and his audience vis-à-vis the narrative message. By focusing our attention on the act or process of communicating, such devices lead us away from and then back to the message by supplying a "frame," an

interpretative context or alternative point of view within which the content of the story is to be understood and judged.”¹²⁸ She continues later in the same essay, “Since *metacommunication* refers generally to framing devices and to the relationship between speaker and hearer in *any* speech event, I would suggest that we use the term *metanarration* to refer specifically to narrative performance and discourse and to those devices which comment upon the narrator, the narrating, and the narrative both as message and as code.”¹²⁹ I would also suggest that an analysis of metacommunication in narratives that cross the boundaries of face-to-face communication and computer-mediated communication could benefit from this type of analysis. Perhaps by applying a close reading from this perspective to a single narrative event that crosses these boundaries we can understand more about the frames surrounding each form of communication. We might then better understand the frame that encompasses the larger act of communication in both mediums, computer-mediated and face-to-face, and how they are both physical acts that interconnect and impact one another. Such narrative events are common in the context of occupational folklore and lend themselves to close reading.

At the start of my research I asked the co-workers I interviewed if they thought that workplace trauma might be addressed and alleviated if management provided a more formal setting for storytelling. Ken Norby responded that we share stories “even without it being an official setting because we have a fair amount of time between calls and we are able to hear each other too. Which I think lends itself to being able to tell each other stories or fill in the

¹²⁸ Babcock, *The Story in the Story*, 66.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

blanks or help each other out. So I think our job lends itself to be being able to tell each other stories without an official forum.”¹³⁰ Employees create their own forums to share stories and this is significant to researchers of occupational folklore because it illustrates the way people create meaningful expressive forms and vernacular modes of communication apart from and outside of institutional contexts, as a shared community. As Ken explains, “it is actually even expected of you, I think. If you are taking a horrible, or weird, or shitty call you know your coworkers can hear you asking some of the questions or giving some of the instructions and so they are already [looking up] the call to see what is going on, as soon as you are off the phone they are like 'what was that' and you are like well blah blah blah China is invading and we have seen some red troops.”¹³¹ The proximity and structure of the workplace at BOEC creates verbal and computer-mediated sharing of narratives. The structure of other workplaces might favor one type of sharing over the other. However, we can imagine that in most contemporary workplaces communication about work occurs in person and in computer-mediated or cell phone-mediated communication. Therefore, any study of contemporary occupational folklore must include an analysis of the structure of the workplace and the extent to which it incorporates these forms of communication.

Working at a 9-1-1 Call Center

The study of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers provides a model that contributes to an understanding of occupational narratives. Certain perspectives

¹³⁰ Interview with Ken Norby.

¹³¹ Ibid.

in occupational folklore studies, like Robert McCarl's shop floor approach, are grounded in a strong concern or identification with the group being studied. My research stems from this same perspective. Most of the writing that has centered around the work of 9-1-1 dispatchers is negative and critical in tone. Employees get letters of discipline and performance reviews that pick on their small, or large, mistakes. Such accounts usually only portray 9-1-1 employees in a negative way, with little understanding of the difficulties and dynamics of the job.

During a "feedback meeting" on October 30th 2012 at Good Neighbor Pizza in North Portland, three coworkers from my academy gave me feedback on my project. It is often very difficult for BOEC employees to meet up outside of work because we all have varying days off and different shift start and end times. After several weeks of planning we were able to find a time which worked for the four of us and another coworker from our academy could not attend because of child care issues. My partner and another coworker's girlfriend were also present at this event. After about one hour of talking about work and gossiping, I presented a brief synopsis of my research verbally. During the feedback meeting there was seamless mix of gossip and verbal venting sessions. Often personal elements of a worker's appearance or personality are incorporated into a discussion of their work habits, a practice I had not noticed previously. Negative personality qualities are mentioned alongside bad work ethic and similar correlations. The majority of the conversation centered around this kind of back and forth between the 9-1-1 employees while the significant others listened. On several occasions the people who did not work at BOEC prompted the telling of a certain story, but the 9-1-1 employees talked about work the entire time. The employees made meta-narrative comments on this fact, "you guys suffer so

much listening to us,” and then immediately returned to their discussion of the workplace. Perhaps the two significant others in attendance understood this is one of the few times we get to vent uninterrupted and unrecorded about our work.

A substantial topic of conversation was the current controversy about priority four calls in the workplace. This controversy largely revolves around dispatch and calltaker skill in judging the priority for a call and an individual sergeant’s possible disagreements with these choices. During this controversy dispatchers have been using subversive techniques (which can not be discussed further in this text) to combat sergeant’s mistrust of their work. During this feedback meeting each employee discussed their experiences with this issue and demonstrated skill in making decisions that are prized among dispatchers and not appreciated by police officers. Venting about current problems with this policy was interrupted by “pure gossip” and gossip which was intermixed with workplace discussions. The feedback meeting included a brief discussion of my thesis where coworkers agreed with my conclusions. At the time of this meeting I was still grappling with the significance of multi-modal communication and my coworkers assured me this form of communication in the workplace is essential in enabling communication and that I should examine it in detail. More than supporting my conclusions the meeting actually demonstrated my conclusions since we engaged in the very types of communication analyzed in this thesis. The feedback meeting was essential to the success of this project since I relied so heavily on the cooperation of my coworkers to gain insights into my own analysis. Receiving confirmation that my analysis was “correct” was important to

me as a research and as a member of a community where individual skills and assessments make one a successful member of the community.

After illustrating some of the preconceived notions about 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers earlier in this presentation I return now to the ultimate goal of this project. I believe by writing and presenting a constructive study about the culture of 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers—to counteract the usually deleterious notions of who 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers are and the work they do (especially from other members of public safety fields)—might provide insight into a profession that is not often considered essential to the operations of public safety even though they are crucial. However, an examination of narrative events in the workplace also brings into focus some of the problems of a telecommunicator's job. Often outsiders imagine the worst call one has ever taken and imagine something bloody and gory. They don't imagine the repetitive and detail oriented aspects of the work. I often answer the question "what is the worst call you have ever taken?" with "noise complaints." And I am not entirely lying here. Sometimes a traffic pursuit can be easier, and more fun, than dealing with the righteous indignation of a caller who recently bought a 400,000 condo six months ago next to a bar which has been at the same location for thirty-five years and the caller expresses anger and amazement they should be burdened by having to listen to music at 21:45 on a Saturday night. This is not to say that our management and workplace community shouldn't devote resources to helping employees who have taken stressful calls related to major incidents, but an analysis of multi-modal narratives illustrates that other repetitive elements of the work may need to be addressed as well.

For dispatchers, it is not about the physical experience of the call, seeing it and smelling it. As the recent study into PTSD in telecommunicators cited earlier demonstrates, being physically present at the call is not necessary to cause feelings of “intense fear and helplessness.” However, for telecommunicators, the work is also about the difference between having a 1 and a 5 in an address in the right or the wrong place, it is about checking the premise information flag every single time one takes a call throughout one’s entire career (or the 100+ calls one might receive in one night) to make sure one does not miss a flag on a particular location for a person who answers the door with an automatic weapon.

After this project is completed, I think looking at the supposedly less significant repetitive frustrations of the job, which are often presented in the multi-modal narratives, illustrates a starting point for further analysis into how 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers process traumatic and upsetting experiences in their day-to-day work even when they do not have a particularly horrific call. Although I appreciate the previous study that looks into relationships between the work of 9-1-1 calltaking and PTSD, its conclusions seem obvious to me, as a member of the occupational group. A more interesting question, for folklorists, is how do multi-modal narratives demonstrate a longer term relationship with the repeated stresses and traumas of the work, as manifested through fears about minor errors and the detail oriented nature of the work, when listening to someone assault someone else on the phone “isn’t a big deal anymore”? When we consider the the practice of multi-modal communication, we see that some of it is brought about by the structure of the workplace—such as all messages in the computer aided dispatch program being accessible to supervisors, other coworkers and the general public—but also reflecting different concerns than the

interview responses about calltaker and dispatcher experience with calls. The repetitive and detail-oriented nature of the job is more apparent, and exposes a relationship with constant stress that is different than the relationship between individual dispatchers and calltakers and the more traumatic calls. It illustrates how this group of workers maintains its boundaries within the workplace and the various layers of concerns about the job and its demands.

In my role as a dispatcher I have often considered that 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers get less credit for their work for two reasons. First, they are invisible. Citizens do not see dispatchers on the street doing their jobs the same way they see police officers and firefighters. First responders, even if they work at a smaller agency that is housed in the same building, do not see dispatchers while they are performing their jobs. Especially at BOEC where the dispatch center is not in the same building as any of the first responders, many of them have never seen us work and have no idea what we do. Secondly, many people including first responders think of working at 9-1-1 as being a woman's job. Ultimately these two reasons are intertwined. Women's work is invisible and certain types of work are invisible and devalued.

In her chapter *Why Folklorists Should Study Housework* Judith Levin notes that housework has not previously been studied by folklorists because arguing housework was creative and fulfilling could be used to keep women in the home. Housework is portrayed as "trivial, repetitive, and invisible—one sees it only if it is not done—and as requiring little creativity from the people who do it. Given this dominant characterization of housework, it is not surprising that folklorists have neglected to study it. Because housework done in one's own home is unpaid and (reputedly) done in isolation, and, especially, because its status as

'work' is disputed, it does not appear to be an appropriate study for occupational folklorists."¹³² She also notes occupational folklorists often study folklore created during the playtime or downtime at work.¹³³ She argues that folklorists should also study the housework itself and not just the verbal traditions around it in order to understand the expressive culture of housework and the meaning of housework in the culture it is practiced in.¹³⁴ Similarly to housework, dispatchers and calltakers work in isolation. While no one would argue what dispatchers and calltakers do is not work, stereotypes about dispatchers often focus on their laziness. I have conducted this project in order to make the occupation of 9-1-1 calltakers and dispatchers more visible and better understood. Perhaps this has led to areas in the project where I am less than willing to be forthcoming about what could be perceived to be negative aspects about how we behave as an occupational group. For example, I knowingly edited out a section of a transcript I included at the end of this paper which contained an extremely callous joke. While acknowledging my bias, I nonetheless situate my work in the tradition of occupational folklorists who have sought to make the traditions and cultures of communities of workers more visible and comprehensible. In this process I also present a new perspective on multi-modal narratives and narratives in the workplace.

I believe that hope my project has added to my coworkers' appreciation of the work they do, and I hope my depiction and analysis influences the perception that the work we do is not only necessary but also quite valuable.

¹³² Levin, *Why Folklorists Should Study Housework*, 288.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 292.

Furthermore, I have attempted to demonstrate that the culture of our workplace, which is often overshadowed by the work of police officers, firefighters, and paramedics, is not only necessary for these individuals to perform their jobs but that 9-1-1 dispatchers and calltakers are a vibrant culture with extensive and dynamic expressive traditions that deserve further scholarly analysis.

APPENDIX A

EXCERPT OF INTERVIEW WITH KEN NORBY

Location: Ken's House

[] – indicates short comments by another individual present

Bold – Indicates speech occurring at the same time

Text has been edited for clarity, removing speech markers such as “um” and repetitive use of words such as “like,”

Ken: (14:35) ...It is just an accepted part of our job cause our job is so weird and that people can be so emotionally explosive there and that [Megan: yeah] even if you don't like the person sometimes you have to have empathy for that cause everyone has been pushed to the edge. Cause everyone has thought of blowing up at a coworker or a calltaker [Megan laughs] and

Megan: You are **like a calltaker...**

Ken: **calltaker...** Freudian slip.

[mutual laughter between Ken and Megan]

Ken: Or a caller and for the most part, people don't let themselves do that... but often fantasize about doing that openly and so when it actually happens, well good for that person [Ken laughs] but they shouldn't have done that.

Megan: Especially on night shift. [Ken: oh yeah] I feel like the night shift supervisors if it is not physical [Ken: right] and it is not like a chronic thing. [Ken: right] Like if you just have it out with somebody the night shift supervisors are pretty willing to be like “ok, lets” [Ken: are you guys done?] lets **move on** [Ken: go]

Amy (15:33): **Would you say that** makes for a more comfortable workplace because you feel like you can express yourself and you are not afraid of getting in trouble or do you feel like it makes for an uncomfortable workplace because someone might scream at you and there are no consequences? (Adam snuffles repeatedly during this part since he is allergic to the cats in Ken's home.)

Megan: Comfortable if you are certified [Ken: mmm....] Uncomfortable if you are a **trainee**?

Ken: **Right** I would say that is true. [Megan: but] I would even say that some certified would be uncomfortable with it. I mean it is not ideal it just happens to be accepted and not even necessarily right because of how emotional our job is, I don't know that they have a choice really other than kind of to accept it on a certain level [Amy: Is?] when it comes to the bullying and stuff like that yeah that is not ok and it is some dumb that we even have to talk about bullying. I am 36 years old [Megan: laughter "I got bullied at work"] talking about bullying at work and I see that fucking shit [Megan: yeah] happen and I can't fucking believe that I am talking about this and this is a real issue. I used to think it was hilarious but it is true that people are just assholes to each other sometimes.

Amy: I am going to totally take over your interview.

Ken: Do it. I am grabbing another beer.

Laughter from Ken, Amy, and Megan

Amy: But, I really am curious, only because you are bringing it up in the context of gender, do you guys feel like, like you [referring to Megan] had an argument with a woman and is it gender specific would you, would Ken, would you scream at a woman the way that women scream at **each other**

Ken: **no never**

Amy: **or do** dudes blow up at each other. Like is there inter-gender fighting the way there is in the same **gender**?

Megan: **No**

Ken (17:16): **No**. I would probably say it is more female on female crime.

Megan: But there is also **male versus male crime**.

Ken: **Well absolutely** there is male versus male crime.

Megan: But I think that is a good point, it is like so [name redacted but subject is a male] and [name redacted but subject is a male] had that blow out a couple **weeks ago**.

Ken: **Oh**, I didn't hear about that.

Megan: Oh yeah, bad.

Ken: [name redacted] and [name redacted]?

Megan: Ugly scene, cause there were two trainees that were like with both of them that were like [in little girls voice] "oh my god their yelling at each other."

Like

Ken: was [name redacted] dispatching or something?

Megan: [name redacted] was dispatching and [name redacted] came over... they had a fight while he was on phones with his trainee

[45 more seconds of descriptions of this particular incident]

Megan: So yeah no I think that is a good point. Men might argue with each other and then like, and I have seen, well that is interesting, I have seen women flip out on men a handful of times [Ken laughs]. But I have never, I think if a man... I don't know how that **would go over**.

Ken: **I don't think it** would go very well at all. I mean just because of the established gender roles that there are in civilized society.

Amy: Well that is why I was curious though cause you work in a place where the gender balance is flipped.

Ken: Very **much so**.

Megan: **Yeah**.

Ken: Even so, as a man, I very much respect... I guess that standard of that men shouldn't talk to women in an awful way.

[Amy, Megan and Ken share a joke and general laughter]

Ken (19:08): So even though they are flipped there are still men there and they are still perceived in that gender role as a man even by the women even if they are in the minority. I mean you are still looked at as a man. People understand that the callers and the police, still look at, even on a subconscious level, [pause] there is a different level of respect or interaction between the men and that is off topic... I think it would be fucked if a guy went after a woman the way the women go after the women at our job. [Megan: also that] I think if way... I think that if you put **it on paper**

Megan: **It would be bad**

Ken: **and the punishments**, yeah, the punishment for the dude would be much worse.

APPENDIX B

EXCERPT OF SELF-REFLEXIVE INTERVIEW

Location: The Nighthawk, North Portland

[] – Indicates short comments by another individual present

Bold – Indicates speech occurring at the same time

Text has been edited for clarity, removing speech markers such as “um” and repetitive use of words such as “like,”

A: (33:15) (Unknown song playing in the background, sounds of other patrons at the bar talking) But it is sort of the same thing for suffering. You were wounded and you lost your limb. You fought over a long time in physical therapy to earn it back, you know? That is a discourse we have, that is a narrative we have come to accept as a way that things work, that is a way that suffering works.

M: You preserved over physical disability?

A: Yeah, yeah. You put it behind you, you like, something happened to you. You were damaged. And you put in the work and effort and through that [put it behind you] you become whole again, you regain that part that was broken.

M: And in that way there is no real language to talk about like, you know like, were are not the people who get ejected from the car and have to be transported in three different pieces to the hospital and put back together. We don't experience the one time severe trauma of, it is just like daily bullshit that becomes overwhelming at times. But then too, I sit here now and have this conversation and I think of how much it like, you know like [pause], when I think of new trainees it is basically two years of your life that is ruined. Waking

up like and not like I still don't get that... I had that today, I woke up today with my heart racing having a nightmare about dispatch and felt fucked up. But that is the difference between now when it happens sometimes, and sometimes I get overwhelming anger I can't control, and the beginning where like I, couldn't sleep and woke up screaming and shit like that. And you, but it is that day in and day out. It is not like it happens once when something is like really bad and then you move on it through like perseverance... everyday that you go to work it happens.

A: I wonder if it is because [pause] so like historically... that is a relatively new sort of thing to have happen. (Music switching to Madonna's *Material Girl*) So here is a thing where it is kind of interesting it is new. You there, there is not, what situation, what role in human history where you have to vicariously hear a very short detailed orientated recount of somebody else's like horrible trauma, but you don't have time to reflect on it, because your whole position is based upon you being able to like deal with these quickly in succession.

M: It has existed for like thirty five years.

A: Yeah, so [pause] this is like a brand sort of new (other patron saying "there are like 7,000 other cars parked" and then inaudible conversation) human experience that we have, so we have narratives of heroes that go back thousands and thousands of years, so whatever it is that you do whatever it is that we want to call that role, it has only existed for thirty five years. So how do we like, fuck we don't have a narrative about it we don't even know what it is called, you know?

M: (36:40) Well and no one has bothered to study how it affects you until like four months ago.

A: Yeah, but I mean it makes you wonder, how long, how long did it take us to develop our concept of heroism. So you have like the concept of like the [pause] the Homeric hero developing in you know 2000 B.C. or whatever, but clearly those weren't the first wars. There is like thousands of years to get to that point. [pause] and here we are developing these new roles that we are throwing people into and where they are having to deal with trauma in ways that they don't have a narrative pattern and like who knows if they will ever develop one before like technology and like society changes so that position disappears. It is something completely different you know. Maybe it is totally conceivable that in twenty years your job will be done by, like uh... voice responsive algorithms. So, totally possible. They just a computer that listens to someone shout until it gets the address. It dispatches the car and that is all. There is no like question, no answer, no human involved. So that like

M: Except for the fact that I think, they will do a lot more stuff like that before they do our job like that.

A: Well you know, that is like neither here nor there.

M: After you insult me. [Adam coughs and drinks from a glass.] I am basically a computer.

A: Well you know nobody's job is safe. You are like, yeah.

M: Maybe drones will tweet themselves in thirty years.

A: That is what I am saying. Drones will see the accident in progress and just respond. Who are you gonna call? The drones are already watching. [Mutual laughter.] That is why I said twenty-five years. I am seeing my job out sourced in ten. Computers writing bullshit essays for blogs, you know fuck. Let alone pay.

A human will do it for free, don't need to pay anybody. [pause] But anyway,

back to the point. That position could disappear from human history before anybody is even like, named it, let alone developed a sort of narrative to like cope with discourse and physiological discourse, you know cultural discourse, in that sense it is awesome that you are doing the project you are doing, because it is not like oh 9-1-1 operators, you know, Cicero wrote about 9-1-1 [Cicero] operators, [laughter] we have heard that story. No this is like a relatively new part of human history that is too new to be studied and you know who knows what technology will bring, what history will bring in the next twenty years.

Being replaced by computers is just one particular option. It could be like

M: Apocalypse happens?

A: It could be that one quarter of Americans are basically taking 9-1-1 phone calls as like they try and dispatch drones to solve all the problems, we have created for ourselves.

M: (40:30) We could all be dead.

A: That is what I am saying, so what I was saying was that, like, eventually what your position will do is fly a drone. So you will be controlling the drone and responding to the callers at the same time. And then dispatching drones to the location to find out what exactly is going on. Then dispatching the police. So drones will like work on the dispatch end and then they will have tactical head held drones that police can launch for their own purposes. Police helicopters will basically be phased out and like, will be like drones

M: We will have the non-tactical drones, like the video camera drones.

A: Well no, you guys will fire kill shots from drones. They will adapt the military model which is where soldiers on the ground request support from the drones.

M: They will never. Culturally speaking, there would have to be a huge cultural change to imagine us being the ones, I like can't even conceive in the next twenty years.

A: No it will be like a skill set. Cause just like cops can't run their MDTs now, they won't be able to fired a heat-seeking missile from a drone.

M: This is horrifying.

A: This is...

M: Well did I tell you about the mental health desk or whatever? They are supposed to get a mental health desk at the dispatch center.

A: Is this because of the whole DOJ thing?

M: DOJ, yeah.

[REDACTED FOR PRIVACY REASONS]

A: Well there is a lot more money in studying PTSD in drone pilots, so hopefully when your career syncs up with that you will be set.

M: We um, [long pause KC and The Sunshine Band's *Get Down Tonight* starts playing]

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