Battling with Swords and Shields: a Semantic Analysis of the Paradox of Belonging and Performing in a Cooperative

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand how the semantic analysis of the process of (re)construction of organizational narratives can help a cooperative to manage paradoxical goals. We performed a single case study based on in-depth interviews with 47 employees, non-participant observations, and document analysis in a Brazilian credit cooperative. Our results showed that individuals may tell stories to influence others' sensemaking of "what is going on here." When such stories show semantic fit with the linguistic organizational context, they become able to shape others' sensemaking. As different and competitive stories can coexist, they can reflect both polarized (e. g., "we are financial-centered" versus "we are social-centered") and paradoxical self-definitions ("we are financial-and-social-centered"). Thus, the semantic element of organizational narratives not only highlights the dialogical nature of organizations but also their paradoxical nature.

Keywords: paradox; semantics; storytelling; sensemaking; cooperative.

Introduction

Given the challenges that traditional business models are facing in generating value in the context of postindustrial societies, cooperatives have been presented as an alternative that has increasingly demanded the attention of academics and practitioners (Spear, Cornforth, & Aiken, 2009). However, managing a cooperative has proven to be challenging considering the paradoxical tensions that underlie this form of social enterprise (Huybrechts, 2012). While these organizational forms create a sense of idealistic purpose that contributes to their social goals, it is also necessary to develop an emphasis on financial goals, so that both interdependently foster the enterprise

sustainability (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Felix, 2020; Tureta & Araújo, 2013; Wry & York, 2017). Thus, managing a cooperative is an activity that demands the ability to manage inevitable paradoxes between contradictory and mutually synergistic forces (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Nelson et al., 2016).

Recent studies have investigated cooperatives in order to explore how such organizations manage the paradoxical tensions that manifest in their activities (e. g. Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Nelson et al., 2016). Despite the undeniable contribution of these studies, there is an opportunity to clearly understand this process by adopting a narrative perspective of organizations, in which they are viewed as discursive spaces (Brown, 2006) or storytelling systems (Colville, Brown, & Pye, 2012). This choice, which is adopted in the present study, allows us to explore how a cooperative is (re)constructed based on the use of narratives and the words used to tell stories (Boje, 1995; Brown, 2006). This perspective seems relevant by the elaboration and storytelling that individuals interpret everyday experiences of organizational life and confer order and predictability upon the organizing flow (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Given that organizing is performed by language, a semantic analysis of the stories that permeate the process of managing the paradoxes in an organization can enable relevant theoretical and practical advances related to the micro aspects of organizational sensemaking (Näslund & Pemer, 2012).

To fill this research gap, this study aims to understand how the semantic analysis of the (re)construction process of organizational narratives can help a cooperative to manage paradoxical goals. Accordingly, a case study was conducted in a Brazilian credit cooperative based on personal interviews, non-participant observation, and organizational documents. We adopted a micro-level semantic approach to analyze the storytelling and explored the terms that the people used to tell stories regarding "who we are collectively" and how this definition changed over time. We argue that, if organizations are storytelling systems, organizational paradoxes are reflected in simultaneous and paradoxical narratives and stories. Furthermore, we suggest that understanding how the dynamics among these stories occur can help organizations to actively intervene in the process of managing paradoxes by contributing to the construction of a collective sensemaking that embraces paradoxical objectives.

In theoretical terms, the study enables advances in the literature of both cooperatives and paradoxes by connecting them via a narrative and semantic approach to the organizing process. Thus, both bodies of pieces of literature benefit, as we seek to describe how a collective paradoxical self-definition is constructed and established as dominant in an organization.

Theoretical framework

In this literature review, we synthesize the foundations of the Paradox Theory, discuss the foundation used for the notion of organizational paradoxes, and propose a concept of paradoxical organizational identities. Then, we review the relationship between sensemaking, storytelling, and semantics, in order to support the following argument: to make sense of everyday life, social actors attribute labels to people and tell stories regarding events, and in doing so, meaning is attributed to words and expressions that are used to tell stories (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008; Weick et al., 2005). However, this sensemaking process is not only passive; it can also be a sensegiving process when constructed actively and intentionally (Kemp, 1985). Thus, in an organization with a

paradoxical identity, the organization can seek to make sense through the search for the use of a storytelling system constructed by oxymoronic labels and jargon, which facilitate the construction of a collective self-definition that includes both polarities of a paradox.

Organizational paradoxes

Concepts such as organizational strategy (Porter & Van der Linde, 1995) and organizational culture (Schein, 1985) have been commonly used to sustain the idea that organizations should focus on an exclusive and dominant approach – for instance, growth, innovation, or hierarchy. Such perspectives were developed under the light of a contingency approach (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Woodward, 1980), according to which, organizations must choose A or B depending on specific internal or external circumstances. Thus, according to this approach perspectives, it is important to understand the contingencies under which one or another emphasis – such as individual or collective work, growth or stability, and belonging or performance – lead organizations to better results.

However, this perspective has no limits, as organizations face pressures to answer simultaneously to competitive demands that show an oppositional relationship with each other (Lewis, 2000; Quinn & Cameron, 1988). In some cases, organizations do not face a dilemma between choosing A or B (McGrath, 1982), nor a dialectic (Nonaka & Toyama, 2002), it is when the choice of a third option (C) that contains elements of A and B is sufficient to embrace contingency demands. In a paradoxical situation, organizations must simultaneously choose A and B, that is, they need to manage a paradox between two non-excluding opposites (Lewis & Smith, 2014).

Managing a paradox is to simultaneously emphasize both polarities (Smith & Lewis, 2011), such as individual and collective work, growth or innovation, and belonging and performing (Audebrand, Malo, & Camus, 2013), for instance. In such situations, polarities are not interpreted as mutually exclusive: they are framed as interdependent (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Because paradoxes challenge the coherence that we commonly seek (Poole & Van de Ven), we generally ignore them or make choices between one of the poles (Fiol, 2002). Thus, certain organizations seek to use both polarities of an organizational paradox rather than ignoring them or making a choice between one of them (Lewis, 2000). However, what consequences does this option entail for questions of organizational identity?

Paradoxical organizational identities

This study is based on the idea that individuals conduct multiple identity conceptualizations regarding who they are as an organizational collectivity (Felix & Bento, 2018; Hsu & Elsbach, 2013). We followed the rationale of other contemporary and classical researchers (Ashforth, 1998; Lewin, 1951; Pratt & Bamett, 1997) concerning organizational identity, which state that different collective beliefs and definitions regarding identities can coexist and transform over time. This understanding is a condition for the defense of the concept of paradoxical organizational identity.

We maintain herein that the paradoxical organizational identity is that in which the conception of what the members of the institution do regarding who they are, comprehending elements of two simultaneous opposing poles. It is a complex identity, as it requires that the

members of the organization be capable of reconciling polarities that would normally be viewed as exclusive (Lewis & Smith, 2011). In a paradoxical organizational identity, one not only considers that characteristics of A and B are coexistent but also that this coexistence is central to the definition that the members create of the collective body (Fiol, 2002). For example, in a company with a paradoxical organizational identity that encompasses the flexibility-rigidity polarity, the organization's members understand that the organization is malleable but that there are rigid criteria for the malleability to occur. Thus, the paradoxical organizational identity becomes distinct from the identity that is associated only with malleability or rigidity. It also differs from that seeking a third solution representing a synthesis of the polarity between both. It is characterized as an ambidextrous identity (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004), in which the synergistic relationship between the components of the polarity becomes the main criterion for the definition of the collective self (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994).

Although the concept of paradoxical organizational identity is being used for the first time in this study, it already has correlates in the literature. The term "hybrid organizations" is used by several researchers concerning organizational identity to designate those organizations in which the conciliation of multiple and inconsistent identities is sought (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Fiol, 2002; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Villar, Rese, & Roglio, 2019). Other studies explore the strategies that organizations use to manage the paradoxical relationship among identities in which a paradox exists (Fiol, Pratt, & O'Connor, 2009). However, it is necessary to propose the term because "hybrid organizations" does not overlap the notion of identity, whereas the second set of studies cited in this paragraph does not conceptualize the type of identity that is formed when an organization has more than one identity and there is a polarity relationship – whose simultaneity is valued – with the other identities.

The study of narratives and linguistic elements used in the construction of the organizational identities is also scarce in the literature. However, language is an important tool for managing paradoxes in highly identifiable terms, as "the identification process is primarily conducted with language, and the product of the identification is expressed primarily through language" (Cheney & Thompkins, 1987, p. 11). Words, when presenting verisimilitude along with the perceived allocation of resources and leadership behavior, shape the identification process (Fiol, 2002), and for this reason, in this study we adopted a narrative and semantic perspective in order to understand the construction of a paradoxical organizational identity.

Storytelling, semantics, and sensemaking

This study combines the approaches of storytelling, semantics, and sensemaking by supporting the idea that social actors tell stories regarding everyday events and, in doing so, attribute meaning to terms that begin to shape the sensemaking that individuals undertake concerning these events (Brown et al., 2008; Näslund & Pemer, 2012). When members of an organization categorize events and people around them, they do so not only passively, by absorbing the existing sensemaking, but also by allocating meaning (sensegiving), in addition to communicate such meanings to others (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Salvador & Rese, 2017). Thus, in an organization, social actors create predictability and order the flow of events, transforming them into a set of stories that support action, sensemaking, and the formation of organizational identities (Fiol, 2002; Weick et al., 2005). Semantics play a central role in this process, since language restricts and enables

sensemaking possibilities (Näslund & Pemer, 2012). Thus, language is more than a descriptive tool to be used in organizations; it constitutes the organizations themselves and the construction of their identities (Boje, Oswick, & Ford, 2004). This positioning enables the argument that a paradoxical organizational identity can be viewed as a set of narratives that reveal one or more polarities and that a paradox can be viewed as a linguistic phenomenon (Fiol, 2002).

Although the sensemaking process is individual, it cannot be analyzed as independent of collectivities because by adopting words, labels, and other semantic resources to order events and social actors, individuals use the meaning allocated by others to such element (Näslund & Pemer, 2012). Thus, elocution is dialogic (Langley, Smallman, Tsoukas, & Van de Ven, 2013), and as the systems of meanings shared by the members of an organization tend to be reasonably limited, the fact that one or a few dominant story systems prevail is recurrent (Dailey & Browning, 2014). In this context, power manifests itself in the ability to produce a dominant semantic system, as discursive organizational practices can be used to promote a set of congruent, convenient, and hegemonic narratives (Collins, 2013), including the creation of a homogeneous identity that reconciles the polarities of a paradox (Fiol, 2002).

In this work, we studied the case of a cooperative, employing the narrative approach and seeking to analyze how understanding the process for constructing and reconstructing organizational narratives can help a cooperative to manage paradoxical, social (idealism), and financial (pragmatism) goals. Notably, in this article, the use of the term "idealism" does not refer to something unreachable, but to a desired state. To this end, we sought to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: Which stories associated with the paradox between social (idealism) and financial (pragmatism) goals became dominant during the trajectory of the cooperative studied?

Research Question 2: Which semantic aspects of these stories contributed to them being established as dominant?

Research Question 3: How the cooperative studied adapted this semantic analysis in order to seek to establish a paradoxical organizational identity that would enable it to improve its management?

Methods

This is a qualitative case study (Yin, 2009). Over one year, we interviewed employees and collected documents in a Brazilian credit cooperative called by us with the fictitious name of CoopCred. This cooperative is a member of the Organization of the Brazil's Cooperatives (OCB), an entity that brings together Brazilian cooperatives. At the beginning of 2016, the organization held a dominant status in the Brazilian cooperative financial system, with around 5,400 employees. This organization was chosen because its history shows complex paradoxical pressures between performing financially and living the cooperative values. While CoopCred needed to protect its cooperative culture, which assures them the maintenance of its "essence" and also access to tax benefits, this organization also faced a pressure to perform well and grow, since this was required

by the Brazilian Central Bank as a condition for allowing the organization to commercialize some services traditionally offered only by banks.

The interviews were performed face-to-face and were targeted to exploring the paradoxes between CoopCred's organizational identities, and they revealed a series of stories that served as channels for sensemaking concerning what distinguishes the members of the organization. We interviewed employees from different hierarchical levels and areas of activity, including branch managers, Human Resource employees, tellers, members of the contracts and systems and credit committee areas, as well as directors and members of the cooperative's governing body. We conducted 47 interviews, which lasted between 35 and 69 minutes. We also gathered data from institutional communications regarding services and the strategic plans from different moments, according to availability criteria. In the second round of data collection, we interviewed again 14 of the participants from the first round to explore further questions. Additionally, we conducted 62 hours of non-participant observation in annual events, meetings, and day-to-day situations of the branches. The analysis of the interviews was conducted in four stages: (a) identifying the stories, (b) the language used in such stories, (c) how the cooperative sought to intervene in organizational sensemaking by encouraging the dissemination of labels and stories; and (d)understanding the origin of the terms used in the dominant stories. We collected data until we met the principle of theoretical sufficiency (Charmaz, 2014), which means that we stopped collecting data only when additional data did not provide new categories for the analysis. All data were collected between May 2016 and February 2017.

In the first stage of the data analysis, we explored the reports from our interviewees in order to find out the stories that were told regarding CoopCred. After a general initial process of analysis, we conducted a comparative analysis of the stories told and identified a wide set of such stories. In this stage, we emphasized those that were more commonly reported, and this process led us to the identification of three dominant stories that describe the perceived identities of the organization. These dominant stories were told by employees from different positions, which suggests that they constitute a socially constructed organizational memory (Langley et al., 2013) and not a mere collection of personal and disconnected perceptions. Thus, they enable the construction of storytelling systems (Boje & Baskin, 2011) that are homogeneous internally but heterogeneous to each other.

In the second stage of the analytical process of the data, the interviews were analyzed together with the document data that was collected and with emphasis on the concepts used to tell the stories that were part of the three storytelling systems analyzed. During this phase of the analysis process, we wanted to understand how the terms used enabled the sensemaking associated with each of the three organizational identities identified. Such documents were chosen as relevant data because interviewees referred to them as essential to understanding the organization's trajectory. This approach is in line with Eisenhardt and Graebner's (2007) approach for data construction based on extreme cases.

After this step of the analytical process, we collected a new wave of data to explore the interviewees' perception about the origins of the dissemination of the terms mentioned above. Thus, the third analytical stage is a verification of how the interviewees understood that these terms were constructed and became part of the CoopCred's storytelling system. The fourth and last stage of the analysis was targeted to identifying the actions taken by the cooperative in seeking to

promote the use of terms that could have been used to encourage the construction of a paradoxical organizational identity. Unfortunately, the documents that were made available and the observations made were not very illuminating as evidence to support the findings, but rather as sensitizing data. For this reason, we have included only excerpts from the interviews in the Results topic.

Results

Next, we present the results of the study based on the data that was collected in the chosen organization.

Understanding the study object

CoopCred is widely known as one of Brazil's leading financial organizations. It is a collection of financial cooperatives that offer services that are similar to those that are offered by banks, such as credit cards, trusts, pension funds, checking accounts, investments, and loans. As it is a financial cooperative, the customers are considered the owners of the business, and the financial profits are distributed among the associates. Because of this, CoopCred cannot be classified as a bank.

CoopCred was founded in 1997 with an intention of offering rural credit, particularly in less-developed regions of Brazil. The social/cooperative values of the organization were rooted in the motivation for CoopCred's creation: the cooperative sought to offer commercial conditions to their associates that were more attractive to the ones provided by banks. The strategy succeeded, and the cooperative achieved a prominent position in terms of volume of working capital and financial results. Given the impact and growth of the cooperative in the country, at the beginning of 2000, the banks rapidly joined to challenge its actions with the Brazilian Central Bank, claiming that the cooperative nomenclature was only a strategy to obtain tax benefits. A crisis in other cooperative systems in Brazil in the mid-2000s caused this pressure on the cooperative to increase, and it had to show substantial growth in its share capital to be able to continue operating as a cooperative, which caused the pressure to produce financial profits to increase along with the need to demonstrate the social impact of the organization's activity.

In this process of searching to reconcile financial and social goals, the organization underwent two main waves of personnel hiring. The first one occurred in the organization's first three years of activity when most of those hired were recruited from other cooperative systems and Brazilian public banks, which usually operate in the corporate rural credit sector. With the growth of the business from the 2000s onwards, the expansion of business activities to include urban areas and services to individuals, and the pressures to increase the share capital, the cooperative began to focus its hiring of executives and operational personnel on former employees of the country's traditional banks, which tend to have a strong performance-oriented culture. This scenario caused the composition of CoopCred's staff to become more heterogeneous and led to the emergence of a confrontation of narratives regarding 'who we are collectively'. While one group saw the organization as idealistic (associated with the cooperative identity), another interpreted the organization as pragmatic (focused on financial targets).

We present our empirical evidence, which allows us to answer the three research questions, as fallows. Figure 1 summarizes our findings and guides the presentation of the results. The first line represents time, and in that line, we show events that we classified as transition markers. In the second line, we show the three stories interpreted as dominant in CoopCred's history. The alternation in dominance among these stories was guided by external factors, which are shown in the third line. The fourth line shows the semantic elements of each story, that is, the words and expressions identified as recurrent in the storytelling processes. In the fifth line, we present examples of sensegiving actions taken by CoopCred based on the use of the said labels.
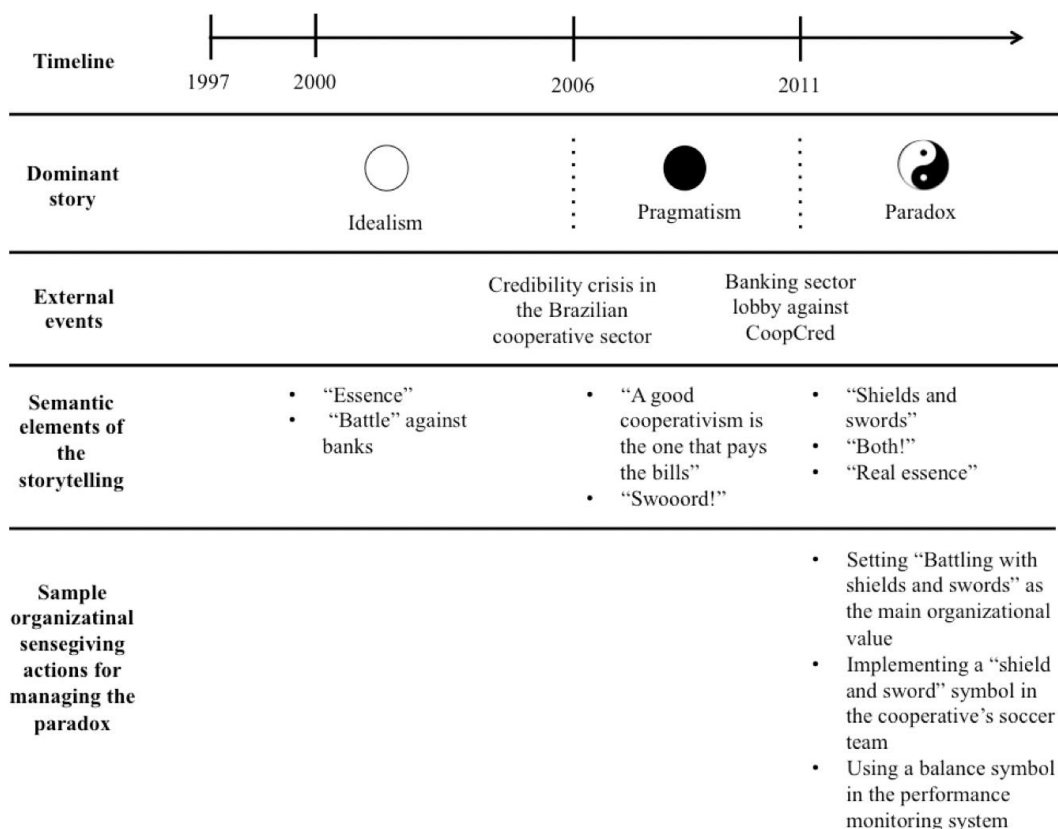

Figure 1. Summary of the research findings

Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

The idealist story: battling with shields

The first dominant story presented herein harks back to CoopCred's early years of existence. Upon creation as a financial cooperative with the social objective of promoting rural entrepreneurship in a developing country, the construction of a narrative seeking to communicate a social idealism can be perceived. In this period, the terms "essence" and "battle" are commonly referenced and frequently appear in the interviewees' reports as representing the organization's shared semantic universe.

> *We had a clearer essence in our time, our cooperative vocation was clearer. We were not there to pursue profit. Why grow 25% a year and profit so much, to then distribute it to the associates? It doesn't make sense. . .. We advocated a different way of operating in the financial sector, we were in a battle against the capitalist banking system.* (Male, 61, director, 2018)

This dominant story appeared unanimously in the interviewees' reports as being representative of the first years of the cooperative's existence. The belief that it was possible to conduct business in the financial sector following a logic of mutual gains imparted CoopCred's organizational identity with an idealistic character that moved people and shaped the collective self-definition of its associates. It was a recurring idea that the employees should, in this battle against the capitalist system, defend the interests of the associates/account holders, given that "*they were, in fact, the owners of the cooperative*" (Female, 58, Human Resources Manager). The cooperative's first mission statement reinforced this concept and highlighted the need to "Protect the financial and social interests of the associates in a battle against the abusive banking system", as noted in historical documents of the organization. However, a crisis in other cooperatives of the financial and other sectors in Brazil in the mid-2000s resulted in this narrative being challenged and in the assumptions that had until then dominated the collective sensemaking at CoopCred being criticized.

> *When the problems began arising in various cooperatives in Brazil around 2006, we started to be severely challenged. It was mainly three very well-known cooperatives that went bankrupt; they had serious financial problems. At that time, cooperativists came to be labeled as dreamers, people with an ideology, but who did not know how to do sums. It was a tremendous challenge.* (Male, 43, sales manager, 2018)

The aforementioned crisis in the Brazilian cooperative sector led to a lack of adequacy in CoopCred's idealistic narrative. When the employees started seeing news in the press regarding the lack of financial sustainability of different Brazilian cooperatives and being challenged by account holders regarding the reliability of the business, the narrative of "essence" and "battle" against the capitalists lost support in the organization. In this context, several interviewees reported noticing the emergence of a counter-narrative that became dominant: the pragmatist story.

The pragmatist story: battling with swords

According to the interviewees' reports, the second half of the 2000s saw the growth of a counter-discourse that redirected CoopCred's organizational identity from idealism (emphasis on social goals) to pragmatism (emphasis on financial goals). The need to show to the Brazilian Central Bank that the cooperative was financially healthy and that it had adopted sufficiently reliable governance practices resulted in other semantic expressions replacing those that had been dominant and shared socially until then. The slogan "A good cooperative is a cooperative that pays the bills", which was used in institutional campaigns on television at that time, was widely used by the employees and played an important role in the reconstruction of the collective sensemaking at CoopCred, which represented a change in the organization's identity. At that time, the term

"essence" was reframed. According to various interviewees, this word came to be used ironically to refer to people who were not willing or able to produce the financial results expected by most managers. As reported by a manager of the cooperative, "*when someone did not reach a target, we said it must be because he was busy with the essence, suggesting that this talk about essence was just an excuse for not delivering results*". (Male, 39, sales manager, 2018)

The term "battle", previously used to designate an ideological struggle against the traditional banking system, was also reframed in the construction of the pragmatist narrative. At an annual integration event held with approximately 750 employees, groups from different regional agencies were asked to create and perform small plays in which they had to stage the cooperative's main challenges and their causes. One presentation, in particular, was cited by most of the interviewees as memorable:

> *There was a group that did a presentation based on the catchphrase "This is Sparta!" It was a satire, a lot of fun, but it communicated well the idea that we were battling against the powerful capitalist banking system. It was a bit of horseplay, very unpretentious, a great battle with swords. In the play, an employee shouted "Swoooord!", and this caught on. After the play, whenever we wanted to suggest that the workgroup should focus on goals and work harder to achieve the financial results, it kind of turned into a catchphrase to say "Swoooord!", exactly the way that guy said in the play.* (Female, 36, teller, 2018)

As can be noted in this report and other congruent ones, the theme of the battle, originated from the idealistic narrative, was used differently in a play created by employees. If previously they did battle with the traditional banking system and involved the protection of the interests of the associates, it came to be communicated as a struggle aimed at achieving the financial profits that would provide to the cooperative the necessary sustainability to survive through the crisis in the Brazilian cooperative system at that time. In this context, the use of the term "Swooord!" became popular in the daily vocabulary of the employees. For an employee of the cooperative, this occurred because "*that word, shouted in that way, represented a feeling that was common at that time and resonated with what people were looking for*" (Female, 42, member of the credit committee). Thus, a trivial term, which might have generated amusement only at one particular moment, came to be inserted in the common language of the cooperative's employees and to facilitate the sensemaking present in the dominant pragmatist story, thus shaping the sensemaking possibilities of the social actors involved in that context.

Certain individuals disseminated the idealistic narrative that opposes the emerging dominance of the pragmatist story in order to produce and disseminate a narrative of resistance. The phrase "it's turning into a bank" was commonly used to convey this interpretation and was widely cited in the interviews, including by prototypical members of the pragmatist narrative. Despite the widespread dissemination of this counter-discourse was positioned as a discourse of resistance not as dominant one, pragmatist narrative proved to be the one that best defined the collective sensemaking and the prevailing organizational identity.

At that time, we who had been in the cooperative ever since it started saw that it was starting to be misrepresented. We sought to oppose behind-the-scenes conversations, to defend, and to preserve the cooperative itself. We often said that it was becoming a bank, but it was complicated because everyone was very excited about the targets. It's an addictive thing, it keeps everyone full of adrenaline. We achieve 15% annual growth, then 20%, and then we get an award! It is sad because at that time, defending cooperativist values made people appear weak. (Male, 41, branch manager, 2018).

The confrontation of narratives and the dominance of the pragmatist story persisted for approximately 5 years. By the beginning of the 2010s, CoopCred's growth in the Brazilian financial market and the expansion of its operations to urban markets and individuals resulted in banks with more widespread operations in the country lobbying the Brazilian Central Bank with a request for the cessation of CoopCred's right to operate with the tax benefits provided by the cooperative status. They argued that CoopCred was not "*as a cooperative, as they should be*" (Male, 42, branch manager, 2018). Faced with this scenario, the organization's board of directors had to restructure its products and strategic direction. Its mission was changed to "Practicing sustainable cooperativism, reconciling socially impacting action with financial health". This context created the space for the emergence of a paradoxical narrative.

The paradoxical story: battling with shields and swords

One event appears to have been fundamental in the confrontation of contradictory narratives beginning to yield to a dominant story in which both idealism and pragmatism could coexist. In the 2010 edition of the cooperative's annual event, this time with approximately 2,200 employees, a play was once again the protagonist in the emergence process of expressions that shaped sensemaking in CoopCred. One group stage a play that represented a battle in which CoopCred was being defeated by the capitalist system. The reason for the defeat was that certain warriors were wielding only swords, while others only wielded shields. The war was won when everyone began to use both shields and swords. After the play, one of the participants asked the audience what they could learn from the presentation, and the answers were unanimous: five participants requested the microphone and stated that the cooperative should no longer be oscillating between emphases on either social or financial goals but instead should conciliate both.

After the event, the terms "Shield and sword!" and "The two!" came to be used internally as tools to convey the idea that financial targets for loans, share capital growth, and credit recovery should be met, but only if it involved attractive rates for associates and with services that consider their interests.

What I found best is that both the oldest ones, who have a more social outlook, as well as those managers who were known as more ambitious in terms of financial results, started to say these catchphrases to correct things whenever either performance or the social side in the activity of an employee was lacking. This united the cooperative. (Female, 27, sales manager, 2018)

Faced with this fact, directors of the cooperative were unanimous in stating that this spontaneous movement positively surprised CoopCred's senior management and helped to manage the conflict between the idealist and pragmatist narratives. At a summit meeting, the matter was explained by a director, and the group agreed that the reconciliation between social and financial goals should be a genuine strategic direction so that CoopCred could remain positioned as a cooperative vis-à-vis banks, while also conveying security to the associates in terms of financial results. Also, as a general consensus, the cooperative should formally take advantage of the unplanned and the spontaneous emergence of a paradoxical organizational identity to institutionalize several of the terms used by employees in order to make them everlasting.

> *When we saw the play and saw that the people were talking on a daily basis that they had to "battle with shield and sword", we realized that the conflict that was going on among the board members themselves should be dealt with differently. We came to the opinion that we had to stop opposing one to the other and really start to conciliate cooperativism with financial results. . .. After consolidating this, we started working on the management of the cooperative's identity, promoting these things that arose spontaneously. We established "battling with shield and sword" as our main value, and we held a contest to make a new badge for the cooperative's soccer team. Guess what won? One that had a shield and a sword, which was suggested by them [a group of employees].* (Male, 54, director, 2018)

It is important to note that in the testimony of two employees that defined themselves as idealists and five that positioned themselves as pragmatists, although in similar terms, the paradoxical narrative was interpreted as an excuse for the opposing group to exercise its power. These interviewees showed resistance to the notion of paradox and, although in public they appeared to conform to the paradoxical story, they told the interviewer that they resisted this narrative. This shows that the organization today realizes the simultaneous presence of the three stories, with a dominant position for the paradoxical narrative.

This coexistence of narratives means that not every effort of the organization to institutionalize the terms that promote reconciliation of the idealism-pragmatism duality (sense-giving) will mold the collective sensemaking. According to reports from research participants, these efforts only had the desired effects when the group understood that there was a verisimilitude between their interpretation of who they were collectively and the terms disseminated by the organization in institutional campaigns, statements of values, or other forms of official communication. When the cooperative's board took advantage of the emergence of a paradoxical collective sensemaking to intentionally propose changes in the organization's identity, many changes were not viewed as being aligned with the interpretation they made of the organizational reality, which is why they faced resistance.

> *The change in the values, establishing the value of "battling with shield and sword", was very easy. The cooperative accepted it very well because it was something that had already been consolidated. But some things generated resistance; for example, we developed a system for monitoring the company's targets — all the financial targets of the employees*

are presented in a balance, in which the meaning of each side of the balance depended on the position of each employee. It was a gamification thing. For some, it was loans and funding, while for others it was credit recovery and loans. However, they established this balance as a graphical interface in the computer system for monitoring performance, and the employees saw this as hypocrisy. They thought that we were using all the symbolism that arose to shove targets down their throats again. We redesigned the system and kept the balance, but used, on one side, financial targets, and on the other side, the goals of cooperativism, such as local development, social actions, and so on. The adoption of the internal slogan "real essence", which we adopted in 2003, was very well accepted. This term was also being used by the staff, when they wanted to say that they now finally understood what cooperativism should be. (Female, 43, marketing manager, 2018)

This report shows the complexity that exists in the creation of actions aimed at sensegiving. When the semantic universe used was applied with a meaning different from that interpreted in practice by the social actors involved, resistance and counter-discourses arose. This result is particularly relevant to organizational practice, given that the anxiety of seeking to control sensemaking and the organizational flow may lead managers to appropriate the organizational narrative in a way considered to be illegitimate by the group.

Discussion

As stated by Sánchez-Runde and Pettigrew (2003), "we have many more conceptual distinctions about dualities and theories and how they might be managed than we have solid empirical studies of the phenomena on dualities in contemporary organizations" (p. 248). The present study showed that to manage or "work through" (Lüscher & Lewis, 2008, p. 234) a paradox does not mean eliminating or solving it but rather constructing conditions so that both polarities can coexist and the organization can benefit from the results arising from the conciliation of both polarities in the daily actions of its members. More specifically, we explored how the process of collective sensemaking in the construction of a paradoxical organizational identity occurred in a cooperative concerning the reconciliation between idealism and pragmatism. In addition, we showed how the organization intervened in this process, which has relevant implications.

A paradoxical organization can be portrayed through a dynamic of different coexisting and simultaneous stories that are regularly told by its members. The act of telling such stories reflects an attempt to attribute meaning to the events that occur in the daily life of the organization and to influence the construction of the terms used for sensemaking. Thus, the different stories told to reveal the different worldviews and interpretations that people confer to the organizational reality. In the case studied, throughout the existence of the organization, three stories that have a paradoxical relationship with each other were noted as being told with more regularity: story A (idealism – social goals), story B (pragmatism – financial goals), and story AB (paradox between idealism and pragmatism – the need for conciliation between social and financial goals).

Our first research question asked which stories associated with the paradox between social (idealism) and financial (pragmatism) goals had become dominant during the trajectory of the cooperative study. The results show the predominance of three stories: the idealist, the pragmatist, and the paradoxical. The existence of the paradoxical story as dominant in a certain period of the

trajectory of CoopCred is shown to be an innovative finding of this study. Unlike that proposed by Näslund and Pemer (2012), which suggest that an oxymoronic narrative, which adds polarities, would be somewhat improbable, the case analyzed shows a dynamic and successive process of organizational narratives in which the construction of a paradoxical organizational identity was viewed as something positive and desirable by the organization's senior management. Thus, this finding reveals the study of oxymoronic stories and their impacts at the semantic level of an organization's context as being promising sources for advances in understanding how to manage paradoxes in organizations.

Our second research question inquired about the semantic aspects of these stories that contributed to them being established as dominant. The analysis of the case enabled us to establish that the terms that had emerged within the linguistic universe of CoopCred as being suitable for storytelling were derived from a theme of war. In different periods, the expressions that were considered to be legitimate in terms of connecting storytelling and sensemaking in the organization had two essential characteristics: (a) they were derived from the social context experienced within the organization, and (b) they became popular in the organization because they allowed the people involved to tell a story that made sense to them. The transition between different stories was triggered by crises in the external environment. This result is in line with the findings of Boje and Baskin (2011) and Nonaka and Toyama (2002), which highlight the role of crises in the creation of facilitating conditions for changes in organizational identities and narratives.

Finally, the third research question proposed to investigate how the cooperative studied adapted this semantic analysis in order to seek to establish a paradoxical organizational identity that would enable it to improve its management. Our results pointed out to sensegiving actions that were based on an attempt to appropriate a narrative and its semantic aspect — both reveal the paradox between idealism and pragmatism, which emerged in the context of CoopCred. Our data suggest that this sensegiving effort only reached its objective when those involved understood that there was a fit between the terms being disseminated, the underlying story, and its interpretation of the organizational reality. Thus, it is theorized herein that the semantic element of organizational narratives highlights not only the dialogical nature of organizations, as has been explored in previous studies (e. g. Brown, 2006; Näslund & Pemer, 2012), but also their paradoxical nature. This finding allows the present study to be inserted among the still rare studies that not only discuss paradoxes in conceptual terms but also move forward by proposing prescriptive processes for the management of dualities (e. g. Ashforth & Reingen, 2014; Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Seo, Putnam, & Bartunek, 2004).

Regarding the Brazilian context, this study adds to others carried out previously on cooperatives that were based on the perspectives of organizational hybridism (Calgaro, 2016) and critical performance (Cezar, 2019). Thus, this study provides an additional understanding of the role of cooperatives in the Brazilian context. Concerning the aforementioned studies, the study enabled an expansion of understanding by expanding the discussion of performativity and hybridity for a semantic analysis regarding the management of a paradox.

Conclusion, limitations, and future research

The case study presented enabled the recognition that dominant stories have the power to enable sensemaking concerning the daily life of an organization and that such meanings are constructed not only at the level of the stories but also at the semantic level. This means that the analysis of words and phrases that are used to tell such stories is an alternative way of interpreting how people in an organization define themselves collectively. The results also showed that an organization can have different organizational identities, which are reflected in stories that, in turn, are told via expressions and words whose meaning differs according to the context and the characteristics of the groups using them. Over time, different stories can rise to dominant status, and in the dynamic among dominant narratives that have an oppositional relationship with each other and, the emergence of a paradoxical dominant story is possible. Analyzing the expressions used in the construction of a paradoxical organizational narrative provides clues as to how an organization can seek to encourage the sensemaking of a paradoxical organizational identity from an institutionalized promotion of the use of such expressions (sensegiving). Given that organizations can be thought of as storytelling systems and that the stories told will facilitate the construction of the organizational flow, performing such analysis can help organizations in the process of organizing for the management of paradoxes. In the specific case of cooperatives, this process can support the management of polarities that are characteristic of such organizations, for example, the conciliation between idealism and pragmatism.

It is important to highlight the methodological advance that this study allows for organizational studies since it proposes the analysis of narratives as a mechanism for understanding organizational identity and decision making in cooperatives. Although the narratives are widely studied in the understanding of organizational culture (Dodek, Cahill, & Heyland, 2010), little has been explored of this method for paradoxical management in organizations with such particular management and nature mechanisms, such as cooperatives.

This study has limitations, which can be overcome in future studies. First, it is a unique case study in which a relatively spontaneous process of emergence of a paradoxical dominant story was presented, which was later stimulated by organizational initiatives. Future studies could explore cases in which the organization has sought to induce the sensemaking of a paradoxical organizational identity (sensegiving) in a way that clearly shows the difficulties and possibilities of intentionally constructing such an organizational narrative. Second, the case studied can be considered an example of a successful paradox management process in a cooperative. We suggest that future case studies be conducted in contexts in which intentional attempts to construct paradoxical narratives have been unsuccessful, generating a cacophony of stories. In this case, we suggest the exploration of the conditions that facilitate and hinder efforts to intentionally construct a paradoxical organizational identity (sensegiving) to be positively assimilated by the members of the organization. Third, the concept of paradoxical organizational identity was proposed based on a study of a qualitative nature, which does not allow generalizing associations with antecedent and consequent concepts. We recommend the construction of a scale for measuring organizational identity so that its relationship with antecedents and consequents can be analyzed, not only in one case but also in a large group of organizations.

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