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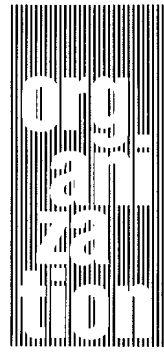
# What Links the Chain: An Essay on Organizational Remembering as Practice

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Abstract. *In this essay, we review, critique, and reconceptualize organization theory's understanding of organizational memory. We find that organization theorists have underestimated the historicity of memory, its associative character, and social-psychological constitution. The critical impetus of the literature review translates in the body of the paper into an alternative perspective that posits organizational remembering as a collective, historically and culturally situated practice rather than as an object of cognition. Remembering is considered crucial to maintaining a sense of continuity and shared identity in organizations by actively constructing meaning. Our conceptualization of remembering focuses on the 'softer' qualities of the process such as culture, tradition, the person, emotion, and forgetting that traditionally were neglected or oversimplified in organization studies. Finally, we explore how a critical approach to the study of organizational remembering gives voice to socially contested issues such as power, morality, and reflexivity.* ***Key words.*** *emotion; forgetting; morality; organizational culture; organizational memory; power; reflexivity; tradition*
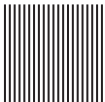
More than ten years ago, Walsh and Ungson (1991) deplored that our understanding of the concept of organizational memory is fragmented and theoretically underdeveloped. They offered their own assessment of the field to encourage systematic theoretical and empirical research, yet
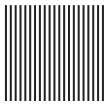
despite continued efforts to dismantle the concept's mystery, it has not lost its essentially baffling quality. Historically speaking, work on organizational memory has been connected to interest in organizational cognition, most prominently to issues of organizational learning and decision-making. Firms are increasingly viewed as knowledge-based, hence the belief that 'knowledge management' brings a competitive advantage to a company. As the amount of information increases and diversifies, the identification, retrieval, and transfer of knowledge become some of the most important managerial issues (Shin et al., 2001). It is against this background that organizational memory emerges as a problematic object.

In this paper, we start our exploration of organizational memory by critically reviewing the organization theory literature that explicitly has sought to advance our conceptual understanding of organizational memory. We argue that many of these attempts to answer even the most basic questions such as the location and character of organizational memory were hampered by an approach too narrow to capture the complex character, especially the 'softer' qualities of organizational remembering.

The main purpose of this paper is critical and theoretical. We develop an alternative conceptualization of organizational remembering as a collective, culture and time specific process and practice, hinged on the concept of tradition as the cradling framework of meaning. As a first step in this direction, we suggest a shift in terminology from 'organizational memory' (an object) to 'organizational remembering' (a practice). Our second purpose is to contribute to discourses on socially contested issues such as power, morality, and reflexivity that are active in organizational practices, including scholarship, by exploring the implications of our reconceptualization of organizational remembering as a practice.

Our conception of organizational remembering builds on a Durkheimian understanding of organizational cognition in relation to the social order (Douglas, 1986; Giddens, 1984), an anthropological understanding of the relationship between culture and institutions (Latour, 1987; Martin, 1998), and on the sociology of tradition (Polanyi, 1958; Shils, 1981). It joins efforts with recent organization theories that shift from a definition of knowledge in exclusively cognitive terms to one in terms of practice: knowledge is what people do together in networks of activity, alternatively conceived as 'communities of activity' (Blackler et al., 2000), or 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998, 2000). This social and participatory conception of knowledge goes hand in hand with a conception of the organization as a distributed, decentred, and emergent system (Blackler et al., 2000), or more precisely as a network of nested and overlapping activity systems (Engeström, 2000). Knowledge emerges out of remembering practices as a collective, heterogeneous phenomenon constantly in the making. As scholars, we gain access to this lived experience by observing how organizational members engage in acts and interactions involving language and objects and make sense of these

actions. The organization then emerges as a collective 'seeable' whose 'local knowledge' produced within its specific culture can be known (Yanow, 2000).

We write this paper inspired by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (e.g. Ricoeur, 1981), a perspective driven by critique and oriented towards the world outside academia. A hermeneutics of suspicion implies a self-reflective, critical turn upon our own academic practices and their traditions. For this purpose, we adopt a stance modeled after 'participant observation' of the cultural anthropologist who from the margins of the field observes and engages the object of study (here, organization theory) in a dialogical manner. The benefits of this stance are three-fold: First, rather than putting ourselves within any one tradition of research we find it more meaningful to refer to and distinguish our thoughts from particular ideas. This critical orientation towards traditions within scholarly work avoids the epistemological traps of Whiggism (i.e. a perspective on one's own research as the most accomplished scientific accomplishment, supported by positive judgements on those ideas that carried us towards it; Butterfield, 1955) and its implicit presentism (i.e. the tendency to judge ideas by the extent of their contribution to science as it is accepted today; Hull, 1979). Second, it allows us to maintain a critical distance from claims to power and dynasty-building in the socially defined and historically grown territories of academic 'tribes'.

Third, our critical orientation also extends towards the world outside academia and finds expression in our attention to inequalities in power and moral concerns. It distinguishes this paper from efforts to correct 'disturbances' in an organization's functioning due to these social issues under the supreme reign of performance and profits. We agree with other theorists (e.g. Armstrong, 2000; Contu and Willmott, 2000) that one of critical scholarship's most important contributions to the world outside is to address the social effects of power/knowledge as insidious control mechanisms, and questions of ethics and social responsibility in their own right. A critically driven analysis hence does not offer a simple concept and recipe to be implemented, but suggests a less definite, admittedly incomplete, itself situated account. Its heuristic value lies in raising new questions, exploring spaces for emancipatory discourses on organizational practices, and in helping to establish ethics as a fundamental organizational concern.

Organizational Memory Revisited

> That such a concept *(organizational memory)* is appealed to across a wide range of studies, even if its definition is disputed, is testimony to the fact that even if people cannot agree on what exactly the term means, there must be some set of issues . . . that people feel are important and worth discussing. (Bannon and Kuutti, 1996: 156–7)

In the study of organizational memory, the approach taken by most has been problem-focused and strategy-driven. Research in this tradition

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has helped us appreciate and tease out the complexities of the phenom-enon. It has produced a number of heuristic models (e.g. Ackerman, 1998; Ackerman and Halverson, 2000; Walsh, 1995; Walsh and Ungson, 1991). Researchers have suggested strategies to make the remembering process more efficient against the inertia of established structures and procedures (Gersick, 1994; Levitt and March, 1988; Tripsas, 1997), the perils of high personnel turnover (e.g. Huber, 1991; Shin et al., 2001), and the challenges and opportunities of information processing technologies (e.g. Eisenhardt, 1989; Engelbart, 1963, 1988; Sandoe and Olfman, 1992). Newly emerging organizational forms such as networks (Jarillo, 1988), increasing internationalization of personnel (Ackerman, 1998), and tem-porary workers pose further challenges. One might characterize the general perspective in this research tradition as one that encourages organizational memory to 'grow and flow'—bigger, faster, smoother—against the complexities of 21st century organizational life.

However, within this perspective, a number of basic vexing questions has hindered steady progress in the analysis and strategic use of organiza-tional memory. One, what exactly is the location of organizational memory? Since the act of remembering is seen as an essential human capacity, the very idea of a collective, i.e. supra-individual memory poses conceptual challenges. Walsh and Ungson (1991) themselves settled for an uneasy conceptualization of organizational memory as both an indi-vidual and organizational-level construct. They conceived organiza-tional memory as an information processing system which they imagined was similar to the memory of an individual, an interpretative system, and a network of intersubjectively shared meanings. Their colleagues vacillate between putting emphasis on either the individual or organizational component of memory; for example Hargadon and Sutton (1997: 744) who use Walsh and Ungson's model in their study of the role of the past in organizational innovation found little support for 'intersubjectively shared meaning' in that they argue the memory of ideas '(. . .) occurs predominantly through individual actions within, and not between, such actors'.

Two, what exactly is organizational memory? Despite some conceptual divergence—memory is conceived as a means to store, distribute, retrieve, in short, process information (Huber, 1991; Walsh and Ungson, 1991), a record of knowledge itself (Ackerman, 1998), a framework of understanding (Sandoe and Olfman, 1992), a retention-learning mecha-nism (Levitt and March, 1988; Weick and Quinn, 1999), or as distributed cognition (Ackerman and Halverson, 2000)—organizational memory has been seen as an object or process that organization members manipulate so the past comes to bear on present decisions. Organization theorists' ambition has been to make this process more efficient.

Organizational memory has been judged to be both beneficial and detrimental to organizational functioning, although an almost phobic perspective towards anything past dominates. This is not surprising in a

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field that emphasizes the urgencies imposed by present and future needs, hence places great value on change, flexibility, and speed (Feldman, 2002). Thus, it has been recommended that organizational memory should be treated as a 'pest' (Weick, 1979). Some researchers have warned that organizational memory harbors inefficiency, inflexibility, and competency traps (Levitt and March, 1988). Seen as a reinforcement of single-loop learning that maintains the status quo (Argyris and Schön, 1978), organizational memory is a potential block to adaptation to new situations (Shin et al., 2001) and can contribute to impoverished world-views (Weick, 1979). In short, like other knowledge structures, organizational memory threatens to be a liability to the functioning of the organization (Gioia, 1986).

On the other hand, researchers have acknowledged that organizational remembering plays a vital role in the routine functioning of the organization. Rules, standard procedures, roles, business recipes, technologies, beliefs, organizational culture, etc. all are maintained and passed on through various forms of organizational remembering. Organizational memory reduces transactional costs by limiting the amount of search and analysis that needs to be carried out for repeat or similar decisions (Walsh and Ungson, 1991). Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that organizational memory coordinates, integrates, and legitimizes organizational activities (Duncan and Weiss, 1979; Kantrow, 1987) and provides a base for future-oriented problem-definition, adaptation, and organizational learning (Neustadt and May, 1986).

Even in processes such as innovation and improvization that call for a great deal of creativity, past knowledge is essential in solving new problems: Product designers, for example have to abstract principles or patterns from past accomplishments to make past knowledge potentially adaptable to current challenges (Moorman and Miner, 1998). Indeed, it is only in a shared context that originates in the past that communication and problem-solving between even the most sophisticated and specialized experts can be carried out (Hargadon and Sutton, 1997). Generally speaking, the farther back executives master a detailed understanding of the past, the farther into the future they are able to project their planning horizon (El Sawy et al., 1986; Kouzes and Posner, 1994).

Efforts to define and operationalize organizational memory though continue to run into difficulties. There seems to be a 'soft underbelly' to the concept that evades the confines of a stimulus-response or even processual model. And it is precisely these qualities of organizational memory (and organizational cognition) that hamper countless efforts to operationalize the slippery object, and lead to parallel, rather than cumulative theorizing. No better expression of this can be found than Walsh's (1995) substantial attempt to bring together conceptualizations of organizational cognition in a probably not even exhaustive list of 83 notions. Walsh himself observes that the list testifies that researchers

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have been working 'alone together' (Walsh, 1995: 284–5). He characterizes the language used to describe organizational cognition as 'evocative', a comment we would like to elaborate on.

Indeed, a number of things are striking about the labels used to conceptualize organizational cognition. First, cognition is primarily conceptualized in visual and topological terms. Notions such as 'strategic myopia' (Lorsch, 1985), 'blind spots' (Porter, 1980), 'managerial lenses' (Miller, 1993) on one hand, and concepts such as 'causal maps' (Fahey and Narayanan, 1989), 'mindscapes' (Maruyama, 1982), and 'tunnel vision' (Mason and Mitroff, 1981) on the other are labels that imply that cognition is (or is hoped to be) an easily accessible and controllable quality or process in organizational life. Weick (1990) has commented on the prevalence of 'cartographic myths' and map metaphors in the study of cognition and strategy, as well as in organizational practice. They serve as sources of orientation in terms of time and space through the specification of one's place by differentiation from others. Second, notions such as 'cognitive frameworks' (Cowan, 1986), 'departmental thought worlds' (Doughtery, 1992), and 'organizational knowledge structures' (Lyles and Schwenk, 1992) recognize that cognition is structured to some extent, thus invite the idea that organizational members can manipulate these structures to their advantage upon making them explicit. Third, the exercise of control though is hindered by 'cognitive biases' (Barnes, 1984), 'screens' (Cyert and March, 1963), 'functional fixedness' (Katz, 1982), 'grooved thinking' (Steinbrunner, 1974), etc. These notions highlight the (in this view, unfortunately) not at all rational, necessarily selective, 'soft' qualities of organizational cognition.

A critical look at these notions reveals that their underpinning is the belief in an objective way of thinking about and knowing empirical reality, independent of history, person, emotion, and culture. This perspective typically conceives organizational 'memory' as the product of a purely cognitive process. 'Generative metaphors' (Schön, 1979) employed in this framework stem from information processing or biology, i.e. memory is conceived as analogous to computer memory, or the brain. In other words, memory is defined as items to be coded, stored, retrieved, deleted. These metaphors impose a mechanistic model upon the unwieldy remembering process, shorthandedly tossing the messy packages of 'individual', 'culture', 'ecology', etc. into neat 'storage bins' (the concept was introduced in Walsh and Ungson's seminal 1991 article). The problem with this approach is that it stops after the very first analytical step, i.e. the differentiation between elements of a complex process. It leaves the 'messy packages' themselves unpacked, i.e. does not analyse and interpret them. Furthermore, these elements are portrayed as in unspecified ways connected, equally weighted 'retention facilities' that impact 'information retrieval' (see Walsh and Ungson, 1991: 64, Figure 1). Metaphorically speaking, once the fabric of the process has been torn into pieces, and the pieces have been snipped into neat

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squares, no effort is made to reconfigure them and study them in the context of the relationships between them that are so crucial for the particular make-up of the fabric as a whole. Falling way short of a completed hermeneutic circle, this approach ends up seeing 'organizational memory' itself as an identifiable, manageable, clearly bounded object or information bite.

We are not the only ones who argue that these metaphors are too limited (e.g. Walsh, 1995; Weick and Quinn, 1999). By conceiving memories as things in themselves, mechanistic metaphors cannot account for the associative quality of human remembering, i.e. remembering forms complex connections between, say, an event, associates in the past and even reaches into the future. Secondly, mechanistic metaphors do not convey the personal quality of remembering, i.e. remembering requires commitment in the sense that it needs to be recognized as one's own and attached with the emotion of belief (James, 1980). In addition, remembering must be part of a broader personal system, my past and history. Persons forge the present as 'a gap in time', to speak with Arendt (1961), between the past pressing into the future and the future pressing into the past. In other words, as persons imagine and construct ideal images of past and future, they meaningfully break the continuum of linear time. We argue that remembering is at the core of the self, i.e. the way the self interprets new experiences, distinguishes her/himself from others, and maintains a stable identity over time.

Thirdly, mechanistic metaphors do not adequately address the role of emotions in memory. We agree with Walsh (1995: 307) that '(i)f our research is to have strong external validity, we must consider the emotional basis of work and its relationship to the cognitive questions that we have been asking'. Furthermore, when emotion is addressed, it is primarily seen as a disturbing influence upon the functioning of an organization. Lewin (1951), for example, diagnosed a need to 'unfreeze' personal defenses (among other forces) that impede change. Weick and Quinn (1999) discuss the phenomenon of 'learning anxiety'. Eisenhardt (1989) considers the impact of frustration, distrust, loyalty, confidence, and anxiety on performance. Szulanski (2003) discusses issues and contexts that affect the 'stickiness' of knowledge, i.e. barriers to knowledge flow.

It is essential to not only recognize emotion as a twin element to cognitive processes, but to investigate the concrete ways in which the complexities of emotion play out in organizational remembering. A good example is Ackerman's (1998) study of Answer Garden, a system designed to grow organizational memory. Ackerman finds that emotionally-driven worries, for example fear of losing social status when one asks experts for advice, drive the way Answer Garden is used. Information of easiest access is sought out, not information of greatest reliability. The operational design of Answer Garden or other memory

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enhancing systems thus has to take social meaning and psychological issues for users into account for more effective operation.

To some extent, our criticism of mechanical metaphors mirrors Walsh and Ungson's (1991: 58–62) own concern about anthropomorphism in the study of organizational memory. Although we do not agree with the conceptualization of organizational memory that emerges from their critique, both critiques intend to alert researchers to the fact that analogies, metaphors, any kind of model are merely tools to think with and have explanatory limits. The main limitation of computer and biological metaphors is that they assume that the search for information is a rational process by a memory-free ego, stimulated by functional needs in the current situation.

In the language of the social studies of science, organizational memory and its ingredient packages constitute 'black boxes' (e.g. Jordon and Lynch 1992), unquestioned units in the organizational memory model. They must remain unquestioned because of the limitations of the underlying paradigm that adopts an empiricist, objectivist, and mechanistic perspective. In much of the reviewed literature on organizational memory, this inability to make sense of the 'soft' issues of culture, emotion, the person, and the past manifests itself in conceptually underdeveloped and rather brief discussions. In this paper, we explicitly focus on these 'soft' aspects to develop an alternative conceptualization of organizational remembering that in our view better reflects the heterogeneity and fluidity of contemporary organizational practice. From this perspective, organizational remembering emerges as a complex, culturally and historically situated process and practice, enacted by socially defined and emotionally charged persons in their communities of practice.

Organizational Remembering: A Conceptual Framework

> Every human action and belief has a career behind it, it is the momentary end-state of a sequence of transmissions and modifications and their adaptation to current circumstance. Although everyone bears a great deal of past achievement in his belief and conduct, there are many persons who fail to see this. (Shils 1981: 43)

Cradling Meaning: Organizational Remembering as Practice in Culture and History If we had to pick one central quality of remembering that shapes our conceptualization, it would be its historicity. For Walsh and Ungson (1991), history is primarily a frame that is consciously imposed by top management. In contrast, we argue that organizational remembering is historical, not just in the sense that knowing one's history is useful [we certainly agree with Santayana (1936) that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it], but that historicity is a defining quality of organizational remembering. Every act of organizational remembering has a career: it is specific to the time in which it occurs, connected to past and future acts of remembering, thus enacting a chain of remembering. Unlike a perspective that relies upon the computer
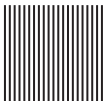
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metaphor and defines memory as a manageable object, we conceive remembering as a practice and process. This assumption goes hand in hand with a conception of the organization as a network of communities in which organizational members engage in largely routinized practices (Giddens, 1984), guided by conventions (Douglas, 1986), yet operate in decentred and emergent ways as they interpret new experiences. A practice-centred perspective means that organizations are, roughly speaking, what they do. To be clear, this definition of an organization owes much to institutional theory, actor-network theory, activity theory, a social constructionist approach, but does not subscribe to any one of these frameworks entirely. We stand most clearly in the tradition of a cultural interpretive perspective as we consider the role of emotion, the person, and history as crucial to organizational remembering in contrast to the primarily impersonal, system-centredness of the approaches just mentioned. What we share with these frameworks is an appreciation of the concept of 'practice', finding a traditional analysis in terms of structure and change too heavy-handed, when 21st century organizations are characterized by complexity, fluidity, and heterogeneity, as are their contexts (e.g. globalization, instant communication, social transformation).

'Practice' reflects these qualities by defining organizational remembering as situated and embodied: organizational members in their communities interpret (make sense of) past knowledge in relation to specific contexts of person, time, and place through various forms of action (Middleton and Edwards, 1990a). Remembering occurs mostly in tacit, that is, unacknowledged ways through routines, only some of it through conscious learning efforts. Novices to the organization develop into competent members by mastering explicit information and by internalizing implicit communications. It is precisely through tacit knowledge and skill that novices develop the habitus, i.e. thoroughly embodied knowledge and *sens practique* of veterans functioning competently in the environment (Bourdieu, 1976). In Yanow's case study of a flutemaking company, for example employees hand flute sections back and forth without much explicit, specific communication, until the flute has the 'right feel' of a Powell flute (Yanow, 2000). Their kinesthetic and aesthetic judgements draw on knowledge shared by the makers that is known tacitly within the collective. Employees know more than they could tell (Polanyi, 1958). From an organizational point of view, tacit knowledge is less a characteristic of an individual than collectively enacted knowledge. Yanow (2000) in fact argues that it exists only when collectively performed. We emphasize the historical dimension when speaking of organizational remembering: the backbone of an organization as a transtemporal phenomenon is constituted by the passing on of explicit and tacit knowledge from established employees to new ones through remembering. Traditions, containing norms, ideals, routines, etc. guide these practices, yet traditions themselves are flexible, heterogeneous, hence change with each enactment.

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A practice-driven perspective conceives of the past, culture, the person, and emotion as complex, interacting, qualitatively distinct agents rather than items in the remembering process. Let us give an example in contrast to a perspective that uses an underlying computer metaphor: we understand culture as a broad framework for sense-making in organizations, and the person as a creative, interpreting agent who engages in various forms (explicit and tacit) of organizational remembering. The status of culture and the person in relation to the remembering process thus cannot be reduced to structurally equivalent elements (bins, digits) of a universalized stimulus-response model, but their configuration at any particular time and place must be specified. Our interest is not to dissect the mechanics of information transfer, isolating pieces such as inertia versus change, de-and recontextualization, de- and re-coupling stages [even Ackerman and Halverson's (2000) process-oriented conception of remembering as 'boundary object' remains on this level of analysis]. We aim to understand the qualitative accomplishment of the process, that is, each act of remembering establishes meaning by knowing information in context. Organizational remembering then is constituted (not just influenced) by forces we habitually call 'context' on both the individual (e.g. intellectual and moral judgements of individuals, their emotional responses, biography) and collective level (e.g. economic and political forces, culture, organizational history). In other words, organizational remembering as a practice is not a means of storage, but a process that actively constructs meaning.

Importantly, 'context' here is not understood as background, but as the very substance of collective remembering itself. Organizations do not create objects that are independent variables within the confines of the institution, but the 'objects' are permeated by and permeate the internal and external environments. An accounting department may, for example create a technique for monitoring costs, but the same technique can be used by bankers to evaluate the organization's potential for profit. Thus the 'object' is transformed, continuously, in different ways, particular to varying 'contexts'. Conversely, 'contexts' make demands on the organization, for example tax reporting as part of a 'nested complex of economic rhythms' sets schedules for the organization (Gersick, 1994: 38), thus influencing how and when 'objects' (here, tax statements) are produced in the organization. The point is that object and context are so closely interrelated in the functioning of the organization that we deem it advantageous to focus on the processes involved, instead of reifying fluid objects and external environmental contexts.

We agree that, to paraphrase Martin's (1998) evaluation of the relationship between science and culture, one may say that the space in which the organization and the environment are co-constituted is discontinuous, fractured, convoluted, and in constant change. However, in our opinion, this characterization of the co-constitution of organization and environment by itself, found for example in actor-network theory, poses

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them as poised in a time-less, universal space; hence, the claim that essentially same processes produce essentially same results (Latour, 1987). In contrast, we believe that organizational members create particular ways of thinking and acting in the world in complex historical circumstances, in other words, they create a culture in the anthropological sense. In contrast to the more common view in organization theory of culture as a social control system (Colville et al., 1993; Weick and Quinn, 1999) culture is seen as deeply historical, and as primarily enabling. Traweek specifies,

> (t)o anthropologists, 'culture' is not all about vestigial values, 'society' is not all about agonistic encounters, and 'self' is not about autonomy and initiative. A community is a group of people with a shared past, with ways of recognizing and displaying their differences from other groups, and expectations for a shared future. Their culture is the ways, the strategies they recognize and use and invent for making sense, from common sense to disputes, from teaching to learning; it is also their ways of making things and making use of them and the ways they make over their world. (Traweek, 1992: 437–8)

In summary, our first central assumption is that organizational remembering is a situated and embodied process and practice that reflects the co-constitution of organization and environment. In the next section of the paper, we partner this idea with a collective definition of remembering and the agents of remembering as essentially social persons. Both assumptions frame an understanding of organizational remembering that aims to reflect the fluidity, heterogeneity, and complexity of contemporary organizations.

Combing Reality: Organizational Remembering, Forgetting and the Social Order   Our second central assumption is that remembering is essentially social (MacIntyre, 1981, 1988). This conception of organizational remembering relies on the basic Durkheimian insight that cognitive categories do not only represent the world, but participate in constructing it. Founding analogies, for example, Johnson and Johnson's 'customer safety' culture (Green, 1994) in opposition to Enron's 'cowboy culture' (Swartz and Watkins, 2003), enforce social categories. In other words, the strength of social categories stems precisely from the fact that they seem so 'natural', based on the analogy. In Douglas' (1986) language, organizations are 'shadowed places' where social categories work most effectively when they are hidden and have hardened into taken-for-granted 'facts', thus deny their man-made character.

Importantly, this second assumption highlights the effectiveness of power in organizational remembering. Metaphorically speaking, the social order functions like a comb that separates what is 'good to think (with)' (Levi-Strauss, 1962) from what is easily and 'best' left forgotten. Acts of commemoration, for example, not only help us to remember but also silence what does not fit the social order. In this way, social amnesia

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is collectively and ritually enacted (Erdheim, 1982; Feldman, 2003; Jacoby, 1975).

A sociological perspective on organizational remembering implies that there is a stock of practical and cognitive knowledge housed in a 'thought collective' that exceeds the knowledge of any one individual at any one time (Fleck, 1979). When an individual remembers, s/he appeals (mostly unknowingly) to the 'collective memory' of the group s/he is a member of. It is events of significant importance as defined by the group that are remembered and in turn reinforce the social order (Bartlett, 1932). The particulars of the remembering process then are the result of the particular interests of the group (Halbwachs, 1995). For example, NASA personnel as a group typically remembered scientific test results on the previous Challenger flight, but forgot longer-term trends in the same test results (Vaughan, 1996). This allowed them to continually approve the flight schedule to meet their broader organizational goals.

We agree with the premise of organizational learning that forgetting is a necessary part of learning (e.g. Huber, 1991) in the sense that 'unlearning' is a necessary mechanism of change. Much of the reviewed literature, however, is driven by anxiety about the constant threat of loss of information. Hence, the primary conception of forgetting is a purely negative one. Walsh (1995), for example considers forgetting as the consequence of disuse, decay, and inefficient encoding. Proponents of the knowledge management value chain school examine organizational remembering only from a strategically driven perspective, hence seek constant knowledge creation and see forgetting as one form of barrier to knowledge flow, due, for example to a lack of shared context (Shin et al., 2001). In our view, forgetting is not only about deficiency in retrieving information by individual beings [see Kahneman and colleagues' (1982) 'imperfect statisticians'], or organizations [see the 'use it or lose it' view on routines in Sandoe and Olfman (1992)], but is critically functional for the very creation of knowledge out of unlimited data, as well as its flow and management. Meaning can only be established through remembering and forgetting (Douglas, 1986; Dumont, 1986). We need to consider not only forgetting that is intentional, but also forgetting that is structural, emotionally driven, unconscious, and implicit through the workings of the social order. Furthermore, forgetting is a complex phenomenon with potentially beneficial or detrimental effects on the company.

A good example of structural forgetting as a dysfunctional force in organizational practice is given in Engeström and colleagues' (1990) case-study of collective remembering and forgetting in a health-centre. They explore, from the perspective of activity theory, how forgetting is a rupture between remembering how an activity used to be done in the past and is done in the present, between the collective doing of an activity and an isolated individual one. These types of 'forgetting through silence', 'forgetting through solitude', and 'forgetting through disconnection' make physicians, for example, unable to see how their actions derive meaning

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from the collective activity, how their actions relate to those of colleagues, and how they may influence the evolution of the practice. In summary, the threat to the organization's functioning lies in ruptures in the chain of remembering between the past, present, and future, and the loss of footing in traditions. Sandoe and Olfman (1992) reiterate this fear in the face of an increase in information technology: the move towards 'infocracies' potentially changes the very nature of organizations by replacing traditions with technologically generated information.

An example of how forgetting helps support the integrity of the cultural and social order can be found in an ethnographic study of leadership in an electronics company (Feldman, 1990). The founder and CEO of the company suffered a stroke and his hand-picked assistant had to step in to run the company. In his new role, the assistant made several significant mistakes endangering the company's very survival. After many months the founder returned and steered the company back toward profitability. Years later, in recounting this story, company employees included in their recollections how much the assistant had learned from this harrowing experience. Yet, in their stories, there was no *evidence* of the assistant's improvement. The recollection of improvement allowed employees to lessen (forget) the emotional trauma of this period, and return to the original culture and social order build around the founder and his assistant.

In summary, organizational remembering defines what is not correct practice by transmitting 'good' forms of practice and discouraging ('forgetting') alternative possibilities. The carriers of these culturally defined, persistent frames of meaning are traditions. This is not to say a particular tradition is always an effective guide for organizational purpose, but that in any case it has broad implications for organizational practice. In the following section, we will discuss traditions as frameworks that reduce uncertainty and equivocality, yet importantly, are flexible, fluid, and heterogeneous. Hence, in our definition, traditions entail spaces in which organizational members may develop their interpretive, creative, and emancipatory potentials, within and against the grain of the political realms of their communities of practice.

Tradition, Sociologically,–and Empirically Deconstructed Any reference to tradition in a sociological and historical sense must locate itself in relation to tradition as ideal-type of social action in Max Weber's work. For Weber, tradition is a type of social action that is determined by 'ingrained habituation' (1978: 25). The key element in his definition is repetition solely out of habit over a long time. The related notions of 'usage' (Brauch) and 'custom' (Sitte) express the persistence of practices based upon long standing. Only the notion of 'convention' also implies external sanction, albeit in an informal manner if standards are violated. Tradition functions as basis of legitimacy simply because it 'has always been'.

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Beyond the habitual component of traditions we are interested in the fact that traditions are the site of an ongoing debate about what is good and right. This normative quality distinguishes traditions from other habitual forms of organizational practices. People develop and maintain traditions as a consequence of their striving for a coherent order in which to live and work (Schein, 1992). In the United States, for example, there is, beside the moral discourse of the self-reliant individual, also the moral discourse of tradition and commitment that carries a sense of collective identity into the future (Bellah, 1985). Communities of remembering protect and cultivate cooperative effort by encouraging tolerance, acceptance, and even sacrifice (Rieff, 1990). The discourse of tradition defines 'good' practices and guides everyday organizational practice to enact the culturally defined implied ideals.

Change and speed, for example are not a priori positive values, but rather cultural values specific to particular organizations, taking particular forms at particular times. In high-velocity environments, for example, fast decision-making is a crucial value. However, it can only be maintained when rooted in strong traditions and managers' 'deep personal knowledge' of the organization (Eisenhardt, 1989: 570). Eisenhardt argues that in these environments productivity is high only when experience is valued, when the number of alternative ideas (rooted in an organization's traditions) is high, and when there is high integration between decisions, strategies, cognitive, political, and emotional processes (again cradled by traditions). In short, productivity depends on organizational practices being guided by strong traditions.

Weber, of course, was well aware that living and breathing traditions are far from exhibiting the permanence and unquestioned status the ideal type formulates. Historians and sociologists have found that traditions are man-made, even 'invented' and are being changed in response to a group's needs and interests (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). Situated in history and culture, traditions help to forge 'imagined communities', as for example, in nationalist claims (Anderson, 1983). Traditions persist not because of superior cognitive content, but because they are invested with authority from their past heritage. The connection to the past is embodied in particular persons in authority and reenacted in their relationships with other members of the group, most importantly with novices to the group. Emotional bonds both to the past and in interpersonal relations between contemporaries play a crucial role in group members holding each other responsible for the maintenance of traditions (Shotter, 1990). A tradition's strength hence rests on its authority, socially constructed in time and socially maintained over time.

The closer we look at particular traditions, the clearer it becomes that they are not simply reenactments of behaviour, but show differentiation and historicity. Shils (1981) has argued that at best, traditions are patterns of action and belief that guide reenactment. The ideal of the 'successful entrepreneur' is a tradition in the sense of a guiding pattern. Every

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enactment of a schema requires new actions that in turn change the tradition. Goal-seeking to some extent always requires a departure from traditional standards. Hargadon and Sutton (1997), for example, speak of organizational routines that allow engineers to cross-pollinate their ideas to increase the chances of creating new ideas. In other words, routines provide a secure background for idea creation. In our terminology, traditions guide both established routines and idea creation; more precisely, they make certain things more likely to be remembered, and they allow idea creation to take only certain directions. In Hargadon and Sutton's study, engineering practice thus led to new solutions to product design problems while enacting the tradition of team problem-solving.

However, whatever consensus there is at any time in an organization about the meaning of the past in the present is quite vague. There is no single organizational tradition carrying the past forward, neither is there just one interpretation of any particular tradition. Furthermore, traditions are parts of interconnected sets of judgments of particular objects. For example, the tradition of competition that motivates the acquisition of a new line of business in a firm is interconnected with particular traditions of leadership, growth, and clique self-advancement (Jackall, 1988). Finally, individuals submit to authority by incorporating frames of reference and facts selectively and ambivalently, always able to 'act otherwise' (Giddens, 1984), given their psychologically unique dispositions and their history. Traditions hence shape and are shaped by their historically, culturally, and individually differentiated enactments. The solidity of the abstract ideal-type hence is challenged by the empirical manifestations of traditions in organizational practices.

The flexibility of traditions though is far from implying arbitrariness in meaning. A fitting analogy to traditions in their loose, flexible, fluid qualities is Geertz's (1973) comparison of culture to an octopus whose tentacles are in large part separately integrated and poorly connected to its brain, yet ordered enough that the animal gets around and preserves itself. Similarly, traditions are varied, partially integrated systems, disjointed, yet there is enough of an ever-shifting consensus in and about them in organizations that a sense of a shared past and 'good' practices is maintained. The consensus about the past in the present rests at a minimum on overlapping perceptions of particular historical events, (Butler, 1995: 928), or on an even simpler level, on beliefs implied in common membership in an organization.

From our cultural perspective, traditions provide meaningful frames for current and future organizational practices by grounding them in the past. Traditions enter into organizational action unevenly, often on the tacit level of rational, moral, cognitive, and emotionally driven action. Much of a tradition's strength is due to the fact that it is implicit, convenient, emotionally charged, and normative. In Shils' (1981) words, traditions are taken for granted and judged reasonable to believe. Our emphasis on the implicit aspects of organizational remembering is due to

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the fact that these aspects have proven to be more elusive and have been underappreciated in much of the literature. It is not meant to convey that the conscious, manageable, or explicit aspects of remembering are any less important than the unconscious, tacit, and implicit ones, nor that they lie outside the realm of traditions. All data need to be interpreted and traditions are the frameworks that guide these processes.

In the following discussion section, we will explore the dynamics of organizational remembering as a process of translation in organizational practices. The idea of translation implies that traditions provide rather lofty homes for negotiations over contested issues, such as power, morality, and reflexivity. Finally, we locate scholarly discourses within the same socially constituted realm.

Discussion: Critical Analysis and The Dynamics of Remembering

> Safety can (. . .) be viewed as a situated practice, an emerging property of a social-technical system, the final result of a collective process of construction, a 'doing' which involves people, technologies and textual and symbolic forms assembled within a system of material relations. (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000: 333)

We understand remembering as a practice that is vital to making sense of change by interpreting it in relation to past and future practices. This understanding of the workings of organizational remembering echoes the ideas of continuous change (Weick and Quinn, 1999) and change as translation (Daft and Weick, 1984): organizational change is understood as ongoing and evolving, as situated and grounded in continuing updates of work processes and social practices. It is useful not only when we think of large-scale organizational change, but also in regard to much smaller, everyday transformations of organizational practices. Change implies a range of skills and is more typically about an alteration of knowledge, including the possibility of strengthening an existing skill than actions of substitution. Being a competent member of an organization implies a process of translation of learned skills and explicit knowledge, given the contingencies of the work situation. The conception of change as translation inherent in the organizational remembering of traditions describes the constitution and circulation of knowledge in a thoroughly sociological way as it does not resort to individual-psychology concepts, and restores the questions of power, morality, and reflexivity to the agenda of organizational analysis.

Large-scale change is typically experienced as a crisis in the organization. Managers play a crucial role in integrating change. If they are steeped in and representative of the organization's traditions, they develop the 'deep personal knowledge' Eisenhardt (1989: 570) finds crucial to performance. They are able to translate, i.e. interpret changes through the templates of values and beliefs provided by traditions so anxiety generated by change may be transformed into motivation for and the capacity to change (Schein, 1996). Malden Mills, for example,
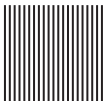
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received generous support from unions even as it implemented lay-offs because of long established moral traditions management and labor shared (e.g. fairness, paternalism, job security, a commitment to people and ethics over economics; Watson and Werhane, 1997). Weick and Quinn (1999: 381) find that good managers encourage 'good conversation', sustained by shared traditions, as the most powerful tool to create a common interpretation of the organization, especially in times of crisis.

In this section, we discuss the workings of organizational remembering in the construction of 'safety' at a building site (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000), supplemented by a brief consideration of the political dimensions of remembering, exemplified by the selection of a bridge building model (Suchman, 2000). This discussion will demonstrate the particular contribution our perspective (i.e. the reconceptualization of organizational memory in terms of remembering and tradition, and a critical perspective) makes to the understanding of organizational practices and will show that remembering is essential to the collective, processual, and contested character of organizational practice. Our perspective highlights how organizational practice emerges out of contingencies related to agents' positions in their networks, and the networks' relationships to each other. Through organizational remembering particular histories of negotiations of power and morality are created, and with them the identities of the various agents. Our perspective allows us to document the diversity of traditions, even within one network. In short, an analysis through the concepts of organizational remembering and tradition develops a grounded, experience-near understanding of the collective, historically situated, political, and heterogeneous character of organizational practice. We will close with some thoughts on the unruly, or, as we said, 'softer' sides of organizational remembering, that is, the role of politics, emotions, and morality in remembering practices, and on the implications of a critical perspective for scholarly practice.

Gherardi and Nicolini (2000) demonstrate in their study of a building-site, that 'safety' is collectively constructed through discourses, rules, actions, and reflexive practices (e.g. information about safety gained from inspections) among a number of agents and their networks: engineers, physicists, planners, legislators, inspectors, and workers (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000). Some safety standards are built into machinery, hence allow control over practices from a distance. A cement-mixer wheel, for example was fitted with a solid disk to prevent the operator's arm from getting trapped in the spokes of the traditional design. Some users, however, may refuse to use the disk and take it off, an action that may be countered with efforts to make the design 'human-proof'. In our terminology, the wheel is a contested symbol that represents competing discourses powered by diverging traditions. Changes in the wheel represent the history of negotiations, more accurately, the marked dominance of bureaucratic powers. Hence, the wheel is also a tactical tool, or 'intermediary'

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(Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000: 335) in efforts to impose bureaucratically defined safety and, to a lesser extent, to resist such top-down controls.

'Safety' emerges out of competing conceptions, relative to the different agents who interact at the building site and their power relations with each other, hence is heterogeneous, temporary, and contingent. Generally speaking, power is inherent in the construction of knowledge, as Foucault (1980) suggests with his notion of power/knowledge, and is both enabling and constraining. The unruliness of organizational life is sorted out and dealt with through thoroughly political negotiations of reality, and may require 'artful compliance', as Suchman (2000) argues, that is practical 'subversion' to get the work of the organization done. In Suchman's study, the choice of a 'preferred alternative' among a number of theoretically possible models for building a new bridge emerges out of practical, esthetic, and monetary considerations. Rhetoric and persuasion are crucial tools in this process, and are, in Suchman's opinion, as important as the rational processes of '(. . .) analysis, calculation, and work with concrete and steel' (Suchman, 2000: 311). In organizations, official announcements, company gossip, designation of important events, etc. develop more or less vague common images of the past, the future, the use of power, deference to authority, and moral standards in a contested, more or less shared manner (Middleton and Edwards, 1990b). As organizational members employ inference and argument when different versions of events compete with each other, the valuations in traditions function as standards that are used to evaluate and judge the proposed formulations (Trilling, 1954). In other words, the remembering of traditions helps establish socially acceptable accounts.

Returning to our discussion of the construction of safety, the inspector, for example, develops a certain understanding of safety, and in turn of his identity, as compliance with rules imposed by control agencies. As the enforcer of rules and regulations, he exerts dominant, repressive power, hence the foreman will focus on getting the site 'inspection-ready', that is, building on what he remembers from previous inspections, the foreman will make sure specific features of the site meet the inspector's criteria. This rule-centered translation or remembering of 'safety' is specific to the subject positions of the inspector and foreman with significant differences between them. It is also politically and morally distinct from a concern for the safety of the entire site for all workers, a competing construction of safety the workers' union, for example, may champion.

Workers though are not a uniform group in the sense that multiple traditions may guide their practice. Newcomers to the site learn the 'practical wisdom' on how to construct a safe building site relative to their position. Much of it is learned implicitly on the job, but new workers are also the ones who, based on their training in innovative safeguards translate and institutionalize innovations at the building-site. By remembering the new standards, they define themselves as 'good' workers in contrast to 'old workers', often unwittingly enforcing the wishes of

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the bureaucracy. Typically, 'old' workers remember and enact standard practices. These practices are challenged not only by new ideas introduced through new workers, supposedly improving safety, but are also challenged by economic pressures to rationalize that threaten to compromise established good safety practices. If the contract implicit in an established good practice is broken, the whistleblower is the prime example of someone who remembers against the grain of power in the organization. S/he speaks out for those who share her/his values and carries the hope that there will be future communities who share these values. The whistleblower translates both his/her indebtedness to tradition and her/his personal capabilities, hence epitomizes what links the chain of remembering.

In summary, the idea of translating knowledge accounts for the continuous process through which remembering sustains and makes particular practices and in turn identities durable. These durable practices are passed on through traditions and simultaneously transformed as each actor may 'do safety' in a different way. A critical perspective raises questions about the political as well as moral culture of an organization. Especially in the case of a disturbance (e.g. an inspection, the subversion of a moral tradition) and the learning process that results from it, the workings of an organization including the dynamics of remembering are laid open. A critical perspective then asks: what power/knowledge is produced for whom? And: who defines 'good' safety practices to what aim? By sorting out these specifics of heterogeneous discourses that construct the object 'safety', critical analysis may give space to otherwise marginalized voices.

We want to expand our discussion of the relationship between remembering and an organization's moral culture here and argue that remembering is crucial for the establishment of goodness in a relationship. Remembering that identifies goodness shows why organizational members should care about their organizations and others who work there. It may provide models for behaviour and lead to gratitude that further deepens commitment to the organization. Equally important is the remembering of moral failure (Feldman, 2002; Margalit, 2002). Unfortunately, many organizations change their names if the moral failure was enormous (e.g. WorldCom merged into MCI), or engage in the manufacturing of forgetting in an effort to control collective remembering. The paradigmatic case is the tobacco industry that for decades not only suppressed research that demonstrated tobacco was harmful and addictive, but advertised broadly with images of healthy, athletic consumers enjoying cigarette smoking.

For the moral culture of the organization, the remembering of associated emotions is as important as the remembering of events of success and failure themselves. Both forgiveness and gratitude, for example, are backward-looking emotions that require remembering (Margalit, 2002). They are important in organizations for resolving moral failures and

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securing commitment. Indeed, collective remembering of emotions of past events is a primary ingredient of organizational identity and organizational culture. Likewise, the remembering of negative emotions can have a corrosive effect on interpersonal relations. Without addressing the negative emotion, the memory of the emotion can be experienced as a reliving of the past event, continually creating feelings of resentment and anger. The remembering of and active reflection on emotions thus plays a crucial role not only in the efficient functioning of the organization, but also in its moral culture.

Finally, the political and moral question should be posed to organization theorists as well: who do we write for and with what purpose? In claiming to describe and explain the world, scholarly discourses create a socially authoritative interpretation of reality. Organizational 'memory' conceived as object that can be manipulated at will reinforces a social order in the organization in which disturbances are to be fixed; hence the call for the expert to restore the smooth functioning of the organization-machine. In contrast, a critical perspective takes the human, often irrational, invisible, emotional, cultural, and historical qualities of organizational remembering into account and explores its discourses in terms of power, morality, and reflexivity.

This critical perspective also constitutes a value and ideal-typical stance towards one's own work and understands that it has historically developed within its own social field, academia. It is, in our terminology, a tradition that combines a definition of good intellectual practice with the recognition of social responsibility and of the emancipatory potential of scholarship. Let us specify what this means: in this tradition, it is good practice to reflect on one's own discourses and taken-for granted assumptions, in other words, to be suspicious of one's tradition. Social responsibility means that scholars refrain from identifying with any one stakeholder and recognize that they are deeply and unavoidable implicated in the world with every word spoken and every word written down. The emancipatory potential of a critical tradition is realized when scholarship keeps asking questions and hence helps establish dialogues on power and morality, especially in times of crisis (we will expand on this point in the Conclusion). In summary, scholarship too is a human practice whose blind spots can only be checked by a historically informed, continued 'hermeneutics of suspicion' of its own work and socio-political contingencies.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have developed a conceptualization of organizational remembering as a collective, historically and culturally situated practice, enacted by socially constituted persons in order to establish meaning. In contrast to a conception of organizational memory as an object, we have emphasized the personal quality of remembering as organizational members make sense of new information and translate transmitted knowledge

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through both their cognitive and emotional capabilities. The necessity to interpret also implies that persons make choices in what and how they remember and learn. Importantly, organizational members are guided in these practices by frameworks of values and beliefs we call traditions, judged reasonable to believe in their communities of practice. These frameworks of meaning are normatively defined and fairly stable, but are also heterogeneous, flexible, and interconnected. It is in the co-constitution of traditions and everyday practice that spaces for the play of personal identity, power, and morality are opened up.

It is precisely in these spaces that organization theorists ought to explore the potentiality of the tensions between collective forces of cohesion such as culture, history, and dominant power and morality constellations and marginalized forces to the contrary in organizations. However, these theoretical enquiries must be grounded in and refined by dialogues with empirical research on remembering practices in organizations. Since the analysis of human enterprises such as organizational remembering advances by becoming increasingly differentiated rather than more universal as sought by the natural sciences, it is essential to ground theoretical discourses in the particulars of remembering practices and vice versa. Moreover, it is in the interplay between action and reflexive thought that we refine our knowledge and hence make claims about the truth of organizational practice.

Importantly, a critical perspective not only documents negotiations and tensions in interpretation, politics, and morality, it may also help give voice to alternative practices. Through the practice of remembering, organizational members may recall what used to be done, or recall lost opportunities, hence invoke what 'could have been' as potentials for future, better practices. What exactly constitutes better practices is an ongoing debate amongst members of the organization. The researchers' task in this is to engage in 'good conversation' (Weick and Quinn, 1999: 381) with all, but, given political inequalities in the organization, especially to help spell out and develop paths towards emancipatory goals with those who are marginalized in the organization. We argue that researchers have a unique opportunity and responsibility to do so since they are largely free from repression in the organization.

Finally, we argue that the critical sensibility for the silenced, muted, and marginalized ought to be extended to analytical practices themselves. Within scholarly traditions, there are ideas lost in the past as well, paths of thinking broken off and abandoned prematurely. In our haste to operate on 'the cutting edge', much of contemporary research neglects to explore the richness of thought past scholars and their traditions have to offer. By remembering, i.e. critically engaging one's traditions and retrieving abandoned pursuits, scholars themselves have the opportunity to develop intellectually thorough, politically emancipatory, and morally responsible practices.

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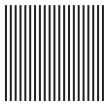
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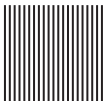
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