

8-2001

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Harter, Lynn M. and Krone, Kathleen J., "The Boundary-Spanning Role of a Cooperative Support Organization: Managing the Paradox of Stability and Change in Non-Traditional Organizations" (2001). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 125.

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Published in *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 29:3 (August 2001), pp. 248–277;

doi: 10.1080/00909880128111

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Submitted February 9, 2000; accepted December 14, 2000; published online December 13, 2010.

The Boundary-Spanning Role of a Cooperative Support Organization: Managing the Paradox of Stability and Change in Non-Traditional Organizations

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Abstract

This project provides an interpretation of how one cooperative support organization, the Nebraska Cooperative Council, discursively functions to help its constituent cooperatives consolidate resources in order to better intersect with organizations in a larger bureaucratic system. In analyzing qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews, surveys, and organizational documents, we found the paradox of stability and change a revealing prism through which to make sense of participants' experiences. We work toward locating and describing how the Council, through its boundary-spanning activities, helps cooperatives manage the paradox of stability and change while protecting their core participatory ideologies. By providing networks of learning, promoting the legitimacy of cooperative forms of organizing, and protecting cooperatives' interests, the Council is an entity helping cooperatives to reconcile their internal requirements for democracy with the external demands of the marketplace.

Keywords: boundary spanners, non-traditional organizations, democratic ideologies, paradox of stability and change

Research on worker participation in decision-making is creating an extensive and rapidly expanding literature base with efforts toward democratization of work classified in two broad groups: (1) participation programs within existing bureaucratic structures, and (2) alternative organizational ideologies and structures (Cheney, 1995). Over the past ten

years, scholars have focused attention on worker self-management and autonomous work groups (e.g., Barker, Melville, & Pacanowsky, 1993), democratic leadership (e.g., Buzanell, Ellingson, Silvio, Pasch, Dale, Mauro, Smith, Weir, Martin, 1997), and alternative organizations (e.g., Ashcraft, 2000). In fact, Barker (1999) argued that participative, team-based organizations marked the decade of the 1990s. During this time, organizations converted and restructured into new forms in which employees take on more of the responsibilities traditionally given to management. Extant literature indicates that participation as both rhetoric and reality is polysemic in nature and consists of a variety of meanings and practices across investigators and contexts; meanings shaped in part by various paradigms of thought and disciplines.

Scholars and practitioners alike agree that there is an evolutionary force in our society that presently is moving us away from the traditionally observed bureaucratic organization¹ toward more participative forms of controlling work activity (e.g., Cheney, Straub, Speirs-Glebe, Stohl, DeGooyer Jr., Whalen, Garvin-Doxas, Carlone, 1998; Cheney, Mumby, Stohl, & Harrison, 1997), yet the creation of cooperative forms of organizing have existed in our society since the birth of our nation. By the very nature of their structures, worker-owned cooperatives have greater formal or legal rights to participation and most likely greater worker participation in informal ways (Rooney, 1992) and subsequently serve as exemplars of non-traditional organizations (Ferree & Martin, 1995; Harrison, 1994). At the heart of non-traditional forms of organization is the priority of participation. Cheney (1995) conceptualized non-traditional organizations as “employing organizations that define themselves at least somewhat in opposition to the ‘mainstream’ and are established and maintained with the principle of worker control” (p. 171). In spirit, alternative organizations maintain a strong notion of process and celebration of self-reflection, collective development, individual opportunity and value that Deetz (1995) labeled as participatory or dialogic communication. The focus of the current project is on one type of non-traditional organization, producer cooperatives in the state of Nebraska. Through these cooperatives, agricultural producers provide food and feed grains, beef, pork, and poultry products to households in the Midwest and throughout the world.

The democratic structure of cooperatives is ideal for creating individual empowerment; however, efforts to accomplish such alternative organizing are often plagued by pragmatic pressures to conform to mainstream practices. It is difficult for cooperatives to maintain their “integrity” over time when trying to manage issues of competition and inefficiency as well as pressures toward expansion (Cheney, 1995). One way for producer cooperatives to manage external influence while protecting their central principles and practices is through the creation or inclusion of cooperative support organizations (Abell, 1988; Cheney, 1995, 2000; Cornforth, Thomas, Lewis, & Spear, 1988). A cooperative support organization helps its constituent cooperatives survive by effectively consolidating resources in order to better intersect with organizations in a larger bureaucratic system. The incorporation of cooperatives in support organizations or formal “nets of collective action” (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 32) redefine, in one sense, cooperatives’ environmental boundaries and “enact” (Euske & Roberts, 1987; Weick, 1979) environments that seem less remote and threatening. In an attempt to explore what type of larger social environment is necessary for coopera-

tives to financially survive while maintaining their participatory roots, we explore one cooperative support organization, the Nebraska Cooperative Council (NCC), serving more than one hundred worker-owned cooperatives in the state of Nebraska. More specifically, we investigate how the NCC discursively calls into question dominant societal values, claims resources on behalf of agricultural cooperatives, and provides space and resources for a democratic vision of organizing.

Despite the emergence of cooperatives and their support organizations into mainstream private industry, such forms of organizing have been largely ignored by organizational scholars (Ashcraft, 2000; Cheney et al., 1998; Ferree & Martin, 1995; Harrison, 1994). Subsequently, organizational theory and research can be greatly enriched by empirically driven discourse about societal conditions enabling and/or constraining non-traditional organizations. The project provides a unique opportunity to explore the boundary-spanning aspects of democracy by looking beyond the perimeters of cooperatives to understand fully practices of participation. The boundary-spanning dimension of workplace democracy highlights important connections between intraorganizational and extraorganizational relations and networks (Cheney et al., 1998). Exploring cooperatives and their support organization provides a natural arena, as opposed to acontextual or hypothetical scenarios, for observing potential contradictions between what people value and what they do when faced with real situations, constraints, and pressures. The struggles that cooperatives face in enacting environments supportive of participatory organizational forms may provide valuable insights to the ever-expanding literature base on participatory programs within corporate terrains, programs often referred to as "intermediate participation" (Rooney, 1992).

The practicality of the present research lies not only in its contribution to theory but also in its value for practitioners attempting to negotiate democratically responsible workplaces in general and within the agriculture industry specifically—an industry struggling to manage economic challenges and uncertainties. The cooperatives served by the Council are operating within a larger environmental context plagued by concerns of continued economic viability. Despite a robust and healthy national economy, economic indicators bring attention to hardships felt by the agriculture sector across the nation (Bereuter, 1998; Hain, 1998; Hord & Thompson, 1998). Instability in Nebraska's agriculture sector due to low commodity prices, lower than expected exports, and reduced government subsidies is especially worrisome given that agriculture annually generates over \$9 billion to the state economy. The squeezing of profit margins, during a time of volatile commodity prices and pressures to move toward "corporate farming" (i.e., in which corporations like ConAgra could have full vertical integration in the agriculture industry from production to packaging and marketing), contribute to a turbulent and unstable macrosocietal environment in which cooperatives exist (Hain, 1998). Economic instability for American farmers underscores the important role played by support organizations such as the Nebraska Cooperative Council. Research focused on the struggles and successes of the Council provides insight into how producer cooperatives can enact and sustain their sacred democratic values in times of severe economic crises—crises characterized by pressures similar to those described by Deetz (1992) as leading to "corporate colonization." The results of the present

study hopefully inform and support the Council's practical efforts to help producer cooperatives survive economically while retaining their democratic roots.

A prolonged economic downturn, such as the one that occurred from 1981 to 1985, should cause concern for the public at large as an issue that affects national and international food production, supply, and distribution. Therefore, this project also aims to increase communication between what some people argue are distinct co-cultures in America: farmers and nonfarmers (Higgins, 1991). "Farmers and nonfarmers, because they are members of different cultures, do not share the same systems of meaning. Their behaviors are constructed, coordinated, and interpreted by different cultural information systems. They hold different perceptions of the reality of farming" (p. 217). On the one hand, Americans have long regarded farming as an institution representing the best of traditional American values. Yet, most Americans live and work in urban and suburban areas and 48 out of 49 Americans purchase food items from commercial operations (Danbom, 1995). Subsequently, nonfarmers have little or no experience with farming, rarely engage in direct communication with farmers, construct romanticized visions of farming, and have at best, a superficial knowledge of agricultural policies and practices. Unless farmers and nonfarmers engage in sustained efforts to communicate with each other, agricultural issues which affect the economy, the environment, and food supplies will intrude upon the daily lives of all citizens.

History of Producer Cooperatives and CSOs

We embrace the definition of "cooperative" provided by the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives (NCFC): "A business owned and democratically controlled by the people who use its services and whose benefits are derived and distributed equitably" (1998, p. 1). This definition is consistent with ones adopted by communication scholars including Zorn (1997) who defined cooperatives as typically characterized by the users or purchasers of its services having ownership in the organization. While informal cooperation in agriculture parallels the birth of our nation, cooperation in legal form is a much more recent phenomenon. Farmers' lack of power in the marketplace during the early part of this century served as an impetus for Congress passing the Capper-Volstead Act in 1922, allowing producers the legal right to act together in a cooperative manner (McBride, 1986). Producers, having important social needs unmet by conventional businesses, have continued to construct cooperatives to embody their democratic ideals. It is important to note, however, that the ideology of democracy in producer cooperatives usually manifests itself in "representative" practices rather than "direct" democratic forms (Rothschild-Whitt & Whitt, 1986). Nonetheless, the heritage of representative democracy of the producer cooperatives involved in the present study does represent a departure from normal capitalist practice described by Deetz (1992) as guided by the ideology of "managerialism."

Since early settlement in our country, workers in a diverse range of industries, crafts, and trades have repeatedly tried to make their work and their workplaces their own. This resiliency in and of itself is hope for the future. If environmental contexts more supportive of cooperative forms of organizing can be forged, this resiliency could provide impetus for a less ambiguous future for democratic organizations. Ferree and Martin (1995) and Cheney

et al. (1998) recommend we investigate how non-traditional organizations' options are expanded or limited by features of the legal, political, or economic situations within which they operate. The interface between cooperatives and their environments is an acute issue. The central dilemma is one of balance. As an alternative organization struggles to define itself against bureaucratic organizations, too much exchange with said organizations can lead to a loss of distinctiveness or a compromise of an alternative ideology. However, too little adaptation can undermine the success and continuance of alternative organizations.

The creation of support organizations is one way for alternative farming organizations to manage external influence while protecting their core identities (Abell, 1988; Cornforth et al., 1988; Cheney, 1995; Cheney et al., 1998; Reinelt, 1995). A healthy cooperative sector is unlikely to develop or be maintained unless it has its own supporting infrastructure (Cornforth et al., 1988). CSOs are created as a defense against some of the internal and external pressures and tensions facing cooperatives. They can mediate between cooperatives and the outside world. Virtually all CSOs have a core of common activities including development work with cooperatives during the formation process, promotional work for the cooperative movement, and training on cooperative techniques. However, the form that CSOs take in performing these functions is unclear and many questions remain about how best to develop the support structure to carry out these functions (Cornforth et al., 1988; Cheney, 1995; Rothschild-Whitt & Whitt, 1986). A few researchers have begun to address these issues. Shefner-Rogers, Rao, Rogers, and Wayangankar (1998) investigated the Cooperative Development (CD) Program of the National Dairy Development Board (NDDDB) in India. In particular, Shefner-Rogers et al.'s work explored the impacts of a program designed to empower women dairy farmers in Indian villages. The findings provided initial support for the hypothesis that the communicative efforts of the NDDDB's Cooperative Development Program led to increased empowerment of Indian women dairy farmers.

The work of Shefner-Rogers et al. (1998) provides beginning steps toward filling a scholarly and pragmatic need to better understand how CSOs discursively function to meet the needs of their constituents. However, the communicative aspects of how CSOs operate remain largely unrecognized and understudied (Cheney, 1995). This project represents one attempt to explore the utility of a support system, the Nebraska Cooperative Council, engaging mainstream organizations on behalf of its constituents. We were guided by the following research question:

- RQ1: How does the Nebraska Cooperative Council discursively function to enact environments supportive of cooperatives' efforts to maintain democratic integrity and economically survive when intersecting with organizations in a larger bureaucratic system?

Research Design

We use an interpretive framework because of its concern with process and how people make sense of their lives and experiences. Underscoring our research design is the belief

that participants are authorities about their own life experiences (Fine, 1998). Subsequently, the findings represent the life experiences as shared by these authorities through three "data texts": organizational documents, information collected through in-depth interviews, and information collected through survey questionnaires. The organizational setting and participants are described below along with the procedures used for collecting and analyzing the discursive texts.

Research Respondents and Context

The organizational context was the Nebraska Cooperative Council (NCC), a statewide, nonprofit, nonpartisan association enacted under the Nebraska nonprofit Corporation Act functioning as a Cooperative Support Organization serving 108 producer cooperatives in the state of Nebraska. The Council originated in 1945 because cooperatives were not effectively organized to advance public relations or education, to solve legislative or political problems, or to combat antiooperative organizations. In order to serve its constituents, the Council is divided into four districts with each district electing four representatives to serve on the Council's board. In addition to the Board of Directors, the Council consists of a President, Director of Education and Communication, an office manager, an office program coordinator, and a lobbyist. The former five positions are paid positions funded through dues from participating cooperatives. In addition to the Board of Directors and paid employees, the Council consists of "participating members." Participating members are federated regional cooperatives, financial institutions, and insurance companies of which the primary purpose is to serve producer-owned cooperatives. A total of 91 farmers participated in the project, including the employees and board members of the Council as well as leaders of local cooperatives represented by the Council.

Procedures

Three avenues for collecting data were relied upon: (1) documents produced by members of the NCC; (2) in-depth interviews with paid staff of the NCC, members of the board of directors, managers and board directors of cooperatives; and (3) information gathered from managers and board directors of cooperatives (who did *not* participate in interviews) through mailed survey questionnaires. The following sections highlight these components further in terms of the "data texts" they provided for analysis.

Data collection

Organizational documents were collected in order to gain a better understanding of the organization's officially articulated guiding ideology. The initial texts included the Council's charter and mission statement, newsletters for the previous two years, and minutes from meetings for the previous two years. Searches for these initial texts and data from in-depth interviews revealed other documents appropriate for inclusion in the analysis including all memoranda sent to Council members during the approximate three months of data collection. In sum, the collection of organizational documents served the purpose of identifying and describing the Council's ideological stance as manifested in official rhetoric.

In-depth interviews served as the primary method of data collection. The interviews, in which the lead author facilitated discussions, were semistructured, allowing the participants to talk about their individual experiences and insights. A tentative interview protocol, consisting of a series of open-ended questions, was developed to include questions about interviewees' perceptions of the Council's purpose/mission, their vision for the Council, how the NCC is distinctive from other organizations, and the Council's enduring characteristics and underlying values. Additionally, questions were included that asked participants to reflect on how the Council helps local cooperatives sustain their values and economically survive typical problems as well as successes associated with processes of the Council.

A total of 39 in-depth interviews were conducted. All of the Council's board members were interviewed as well as the President of the Council, then Director of Communications and Education, and Office Manager. Over a two-month period, several managers (N = 17) and board directors (N = 10) from local cooperatives across the state were also interviewed. Stratified purposeful sampling procedures, in which various subgroups are represented, was used when selecting managers and board directors of local cooperatives for in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1984). In other words, an effort was made to interview both managers and board directors of cooperatives from each of the four geographic districts represented by the Council. It is important to note that all the interviewees were also currently farming in addition to serving in leadership positions within their local cooperatives. The interviews with managers and board directors of local cooperatives were conducted in the natural environments of the cooperatives or the homes of the interviewees. Interviews with the paid staff of the NCC were conducted at the Council's home office. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and a half. In order to get as clear a picture as possible and have permanent artifacts ideally suited for transcription purposes, the interviews were audiotaped. Transcription of the interviews yielded more than 750 pages of single-spaced data.

Survey packets were mailed to managers and board directors of local cooperatives represented by the NCC who *did not* participate in interviews (N = 69). Each survey packet consisted of a consent form, demographic sheet, and several open-ended questions consistent with questions asked during the in-depth interviews. Self-addressed stamped envelopes were also included for participants to return the surveys. A follow-up reminder was sent to all individuals. A total of 52 surveys were returned, resulting in a 75% response rate. Survey responses were transcribed and included in the database, yielding more than 100 pages of single-spaced data.

Data analysis

A thematic analysis of the discourse collected through in-depth interviews, survey questionnaires, and organizational documents was conducted using the constant comparative method (Lindlof, 1995). This process begins with data "reduction" and "interpretation" (Creswell, 1997; Lindlof, 1995) and is consistent with processes engaged in by other communication scholars doing interpretive work (e.g., Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Clair & Thompson, 1996; Trethewey, 1997). First, all transcripts and documents were read in their entirety to develop a sense of these data as a whole. The transcripts were reread

while playing the original tapes to ensure accuracy of transcriptions and to note special emphases or cues (e.g., paralinguistics) that might affect interpretation but did not appear on the transcripts. After “cleaning the data” and gaining a holistic sense of the discourse, we started the actual analysis process.

Instead of using a predetermined category scheme, themes were allowed to emerge from subjects’ own words as recommended for exploratory research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A constant comparative method allowed us to simultaneously code and analyze the data in order to categorize it into developing “themes” representing recurring patterns of behaviors and meanings. The process began by manually coding the data on the actual transcripts. By engaging in constant comparative analysis of data, specific incidents in the data were continually compared, concepts were refined, and their properties were identified. In this inductive process, data segments were sorted into overarching categories that described members’ understanding of and experiences with the Council: (1) networks of learning, (2) promoting legitimacy, (3) and protecting interests. The development of sub-themes within each category was an emergent process that continued as the data analysis proceeded. As the analysis progressed, the themes were framed around the paradox of stability and change as it provided a good fit with these data.

Rather than manually organizing themes, NUD.IST was used to help sort the data. As Richards and Richards (1998) and Kelle (1995) suggest, using computer-assisted software for data analysis increases the efficiency with which the code-and-retrieval parts of the analytic process are managed. With NUD.IST, a root directory was created to keep track of actual products of coding, including information such as conceptual labels and thick descriptions of data. The process of identifying themes or patterns occurred until the data sufficiently repeated itself and saturation occurred. It is imperative to stress that the success of computer-aided analysis still rests with the theoretical sensitivity of the investigator when creating and using coding schemes. NUD.IST did not identify themes throughout the analysis; it merely functioned as a tool helping manage the data as we categorized it. We believe the use of NUD.IST helped ensure that themes developed were really grounded in data and not based on single or atypical situations.

Attempts to verify the accuracy of the findings were facilitated through member-checking processes. Member checks are opportunities for researchers to solicit informants’ views of the credibility of findings (Creswell, 1997; Lindlof, 1995). For the current project, two member-checking sessions with multiple participants were conducted after the initial analyses of data were conducted. First, a thirty-page summary of results was provided to the President and office manager. The first author met with both of them to collect their reflections on the results. Additionally, a two-page executive summary was provided to five interviewees, and the first author proceeded to meet with them to gather their insights. New information and insights gleaned during member checks resulted in more than 50 transcribed pages and were included in the database.

Results and Interpretations

Participants’ narratives are saturated with the presence of a paradox that not only paralyzes action but also enables it—the need for both stability and change. At the heart of

contemporary producer cooperatives, and modern institutions in general, is the persistence of the dialectic of stability and change (Czarniawska, 1997). The term paradox comes from the Greek word "para + dokein" meaning "to think twice; to reconcile two apparently conflicting views" (Putnam, 1986, p. 153). Putnam argues that system-wide paradoxes accrue from the complexities of organizing and are inevitable. In reference to the paradox of change and stability in particular, O'Connor (1995) argues:

organizational change is a system contradiction in itself. Change and change processes run counter to fundamental interests of management, such as control, stability, predictability, rationality, and economic results . . . organizational change requires a tolerance for floundering and a willingness to accept more and more change. (p. 770)

Contradictions are thus key phenomena for understanding change. Members desire predictability in organizations while at the same time are energized by spontaneity and novelty (Weick & Westley, 1996). From the interplay of certainty with uncertainty, order with disorder, predictability with novelty, organizations sustain a dynamic ongoingness. Berg and Smith (1990) argue that recognizing the paradox of stability and change makes it possible to discover a link between opposing forces and open up the framework that gives meaning to the apparent contradictions in the experience. We embrace the perspective that paradoxes are properties of life itself. While the term "paradox" commonly connotes something negative or inconsistent, it captures the inherent tension between seemingly opposing forces. We do not use the term as evidence of failure or inadequacy. Like other communication scholars guided by dialectical perspectives (see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Putnam, 1986), we assume the presence of oppositional forces are inherent in our social realities. The discourse reveals perceptions of the NCC as an active agent in helping members of cooperatives acknowledge and manage the paradox of stability and change. Paradox appears in the interwoven but oppositional forces, namely through struggles between action and structure, stability and instability (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996).

Listening to members of cooperatives, we were impressed by their struggle with the ongoing tensions between the forces of stability and change. "I spent probably 65% of my time this last year wondering or considering how cooperatives are gonna change. Without a doubt, co-ops must adapt to the changing ag environment" suggests one co-op manager. Yet, innovations and change, whether officially sanctioned or not, frequently oppose the prevailing way of doing things in organizations (Putnam, 1986). Any attempt to work with change needs to take into consideration those individual and organizational defense mechanisms against anxiety that structure and form managerial and organizational responses to change (Vince & Broussine, 1996). In a conversation with the President of the Council, he described his role as "helping cooperatives change without changing." When asked to explain what he meant, he said, "without continual education, the cooperative character can slip away with perhaps not even a whimper of protest, and the cooperative can become regarded the same as any other business." Cooperatives, at times, struggle to remain stable in the midst of change. For instance, cooperatives strive to maintain their participatory

ideology (i.e., stability—the prevailing way of organizing activity in cooperatives) while trying to embrace changes that may threaten democracy (e.g., mergers between cooperatives that lead to increased size of organization and perhaps less opportunity for participation).

Throughout their discourse, participants characterized the negotiation of change and stability as primarily due to technological advances, legislative actions, and a competitive marketplace providing opportunities for globalization. “There’s so much new technology available that producers can determine exactly what combination of N, P, and K should be applied to each acre,” argued one man in his discussion of how technological advances allow better fertilizer placement through site-specific application.

Underscoring participants’ discussions was the speed of change. “I don’t know where we are going to be in 3 to 5 years anymore because everything is changing so fast, everything is so fluid. It isn’t that change is something new; that’s always been there. It is the speed of change. Long-term planning is three years, not ten.” Helping cooperatives stay current with the changing agriculture industry was cited by the President of the Council as a key concern: “I think the biggest thing that will affect this association here, and my successor, is helping co-ops safely position themselves while keeping up with the pace of change.”

Uncertainty often accompanies change as does the search for predictability and order (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Furthermore, people experiencing paradoxical situations also experience anxiety (Leathers, 1979) and feelings of paralysis (Putnam et al., 1996). Thus, it was hardly surprising to hear interviewees share their anxieties about the changing agriculture environment. Participants’ discourse indicates that the forces of certainty and uncertainty coexist in a dynamic interplay with one another. “We all get very comfortable with what we are doing and sometimes we are forced into change and the change is a little different and we have to just step back and take a moment, be open-minded, be at peace with ambiguity knowing we will reach that comfort zone again,” shared one man. We heard organizing being described as the ongoing process of weaving together the certainty of continuity and the uncertainty of discontinuity. Hence, it appears that it is the process of uncertainty reduction that is important, not necessarily the achievement of uncertainty reduction. Importantly, the Council was described as playing a key role in helping cooperatives help their members to balance stability and change. “We are a diminishing breed of folk, agriculture is. So was the dinosaur. The dinosaur would not change. So he’s no longer here. Are we going to refuse to change and become extinct? That’s why we need the help of the Council.” Individuals experiencing novel encounters are often motivated to seek information to reduce uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). In organizations, communication can provide stability in uncertain situations and enable members to make sense of critical events (Weick, 1979; Kramer, 1994; Jorgensen & Patelle, 1992). Sufficient task information is necessary to perform appropriately, clarify role expectations, and develop appropriate scripts and schemas to understand and participate in social systems (Jablin, 1987). Throughout our interviews, the uncertainty reduction function of talk was illustrated as we heard participants talk about their reliance on the Council to make sense of their environment and provide space for dialogue between the unpredictable and the

given. The NCC serves to forestall, forecast, and absorb uncertainty in order for cooperatives to achieve orderly, reliable patterns of resource flow and exchange. In this sense, the Council serves an important "boundary-spanning" role as it attempts to establish and manage relationships between cooperatives and external agencies (Adams, 1976, 1980; Fennell & Alexander, 1987; Oliver, 1990; Thompson, 1967).

The NCC serves as a peripheral structure dealing directly or interfacing with the environment and has evolved to help cooperatives manage the ongoing dialectic of controlling and being controlled by their environments. The Council searches for and collects information about decision-making on plausible events which might affect cooperatives. Relying on the NCC as an adaptive response to environmental uncertainty is especially critical for cooperatives in times of turbulent instability. In this sense, the Council's communication activities serve as stabilizing forces for the cooperatives. "How would I describe the council?" stated a co-op manager, "I think it's probably the backbone of the cooperative movement in the state of Nebraska. I think we need an organization like that to protect us, especially in today's changing trend lines in the ag environment." Another person described the Council as "providing a sense of continuity." This sense of connection with the past and with like-minded others serves an important function described by Handy (1995) as, "an antidote to feelings of impotence which rapid change induces in us all" (p. 248). The Council operates as an entity helping their constituents preserve their historically created and maintained cooperative spirit in the face of innovation and change. Perceptions of the Council as boundary role occupants helping cooperatives negotiate the paradox of stability and change are evident in three broad themes: networks of learning, promoting legitimacy, and protecting interests. In addition to data excerpts woven into the following discussion, see Appendix A for a table of significant statements supporting arguments constructed around the following themes.

Theme 1: Networks of Learning

The Council was described by many as a network linking cooperatives together. The NCC represents a bridging strategy on the part of cooperatives, a way in which they can construct connections with various actors in their environments. Through the activities of the Council, cooperatives are able to come together and pursue common or mutually beneficial goals and interests. "It's [the Council] a good way to get a group of people together that are all in this together, that are all in this for the same reasons," shared one manager while the board director of the same co-op commented, "During meetings, we have a chance to visit with other like-minded people. It truly is an effective way to bring us together." The networks of learning created through the Council were described by many as emphasizing cooperation, collaboration, and coordination. Through the Council, cooperatives are able to maximize their resource base in order to reduce duplication of efforts and optimize goal attainment. At the crux of the learning networks is the promotion of the collective good of members through information-sharing. The following two subthemes, locus of innovation and avoiding stagnation, further explore how the Council functions to help cooperatives manage the paradox of stability and change through their networks of learning. The subthemes illustrate how cooperatives have constructed an environment fostering alliances and allowing cooperatives to remain true to their democratic ideology by

integrating their core values in decision-making (Conrad, 1993) while embracing innovation and change in order to economically prosper. The coordination efforts of the Council illustrate how two or more organizations can share power and develop social agreements that stabilize and coordinate mutual interdependence (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Locus of innovation

When the knowledge base of an industry is complex and ever-changing, the locus of innovation is often found in networks of learning rather than in individual organizations (Powell, Koput, Smith-Doerr, 1996). Change becomes a stimulus to and focus of collaborative efforts seeking to reduce uncertainties associated with emerging trends. Pervasive throughout participants' discourse was their fundamental concern for accessing new information, technologies, and markets. In environments characterized by instability due to various factors including rapid technological development, very few small organizations have the internal capabilities necessary for managing uncertainty. The Council provides a venue through which cooperatives can pool their resources for innovative purposes. In the case of the Council, members perceive collaboration as a way to enhance organizational learning. Sources of innovation do not lie within the boundaries of a single cooperative. Rather, innovation and sense-making about it occurs in a context of a community of cooperatives.

In the early 1980s, the Council established an Educational Advisory Committee (EAC) comprising primarily a board directors and managers of cooperatives and led by a paid, full-time educational director whose role is developing, planning, and coordinating the education programs. Also serving on the committee in a nonvoting, ex-officio capacity is a representative of the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources. The committee reviews educational programs to identify needs and establishes priorities and practical approaches for the Council's educational efforts. Underscoring the Council's educational programs is the belief that continuing education plays an increasingly important role in assuring that "cooperatives operate not only efficiently but in the cooperative spirit." Through its education initiatives, the Council appears to serve an ideological function in promoting social solidarity among cooperative members around a value system based on democratic principles. This discursive functioning of the Council is particularly important considering the larger corporate culture, in which cooperatives are situated, valuing innovations that lead to growth, production, and maximization of profit (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

At the crux of the Council's education endeavors is the Director Certification Program (DCP). This program is currently cosponsored by the University of Nebraska. One of the main objectives of the DCP is to provide a basic understanding of cooperatives including the responsibilities of the board of directors. Many interviewees described the importance of this program in helping them to learn to put on the "cooperative hat" and consider how decisions affect more than their family farm. Participants described the program as inculcating a sense of collectivity that may at times be in opposition to a sense of individuality among farmers. At their most basic level, the programs are designed to teach members about how to organize themselves in a cooperative and collective manner. For any social organization to function, there must exist a common set of norms, values, and expectations

(Jablin, 1987). These may take the form of accepted traditions or formal rules. A democratic consciousness is essential to cooperatives. Additionally, a fundamental part of the character of cooperatives is their need to understand themselves in collectivist terms. The Council's efforts are directed toward instilling the philosophy and practice of participation necessary to maintain a democratic set of values. As a key agent of socialization, the Council serves as an important vehicle for cultivating the ideology of democracy as well as collectivity among the cooperative community and constructing an identity for the cooperative movement in the state of Nebraska. "Using baseball terms," noted the President of the Council, "our role is getting them out of the dug out to home plate so they can participate in the game."

The Council's educational programs were discussed by interviewees as playing a key role in their making sense of cooperative life and creating an evaluative base from which to judge situations, actions, and objects. In other words, the Council's locus of innovation discursively functions to create and maintain the fundamental character of cooperatives. Beneath the ideological vision of democracy, however, lies the much more difficult and complex terrain of practical problems. Democracies, motivated by a desire for control of the enterprise by the people, often inhibit a timely response to environmental change and innovation. The Council was described by participants as a locus of innovation—a forum accessing knowledge but also helping members develop the capabilities to critically evaluate innovation and adapt to change in ways that allow them to maintain the cooperative spirit. From a communication perspective, the Council's efforts can be understood as discursive practices helping cooperatives manage the ever-present tensions between the external corporate value of efficiency through innovation and the cooperative value of participation.

Avoiding stagnation

Cooperative leaders recognize the importance of continuing education as being essential to survival and future growth. As today's agriculture climate increases in complexity, the challenges facing cooperatives become greater. Decisions are more difficult and costly. Additionally, cooperative leaders must face their own and others' desire for stability and hesitations toward change. Many participants shared their perceptions of how easy it is to become stagnant or stale in lieu of innovation.

I think education's gonna be a big challenge for us. To keep our member patron owners educated on why we can't do this like we did a few years ago or 10 years ago. Why it's necessary that a cooperative adapt and change and become more efficient in order to survive. It seems like some of our members have done things the same way for umpteen years and they get comfortable with the status quo and they don't see why they have to change. It's easy to become complacent, oh we've been doing it this way for years, why should we change now?

The Council, through its ongoing educational efforts, was described by participants as helping them to avoid stagnation. One of the Council's educational efforts, beyond the DCP, is the Graduate Director Seminar (GDS) series. These programs are designed to provide opportunities for continuing education for directors and managers. While the series

builds on materials covered in the DCP, the topics covered vary depending on members' needs and interests as well as compelling industry issues. Then Director of Education for the Council described the director manager workshops as "dealing with very current trends within cooperatives and how changes in agriculture are impacting cooperatives and what cooperatives need to do to change. This coming year it will focus on using the Internet in the agriculture industry." In the face of economic hardship and increased competition from corporate farms, the Council is helping cooperatives fight stagnation by increasing their awareness of different strategic choices that could enhance their efficiencies. The Council helps cooperatives proactively engage in strategies (e.g., using the Internet to market commodities) that allow cooperatives to control, and not merely adapt to, their environments.

Throughout their discourse, interviewees emphasized how the seminars helped them prevent stagnation in their local cooperatives and "think outside the box." When talking about cooperatives struggling to survive, many participants suggested the catalyst to failure was more often than not a lack of innovation on the part of the cooperatives. "I think the companies that have not had directors at those meetings, those are the ones struggling. Those co-ops are becoming nonexistent because they are not keeping up with what's going on," commented one participant while another suggested, "The surviving co-ops out there, the ones that haven't grown stagnant, are the ones willing to participate in their own education. Now is that the only reason they are surviving? No, I'm not saying that. But I am saying, it is part of the equation." Training is an investment helping cooperatives operate effectively as they change and adapt to diverse business opportunities.

Cooperative members acknowledge the desire for participatory values within their organizations and recognize the need for cooperative education among members to ensure a consciousness based on those values. This need is particularly acute given that cooperatives exist in a mesh of relationships with external institutions governed by free-enterprise ideology. Such external agencies can constrain and challenge the actions of cooperatives. Furthermore, the agriculture industry in general is facing extreme pressure to sustain competitive advantage and provide higher levels of performance. Through their networks of learning, the Council serves as a locus of innovation and helps members avoid stagnation while maintaining the cooperative spirit. Furthermore, environments are "enacted" (Weick, 1979) and common meanings are negotiated and shared through the Council's networks of learning.

Theme 2: Promoting Legitimacy

Cooperatives exist in a complex web of relationships with other entities that can stimulate, constrain, or challenge their actions. It is within this dynamic interplay of forces that the enhancement of organizational legitimacy becomes a motivation for cooperatives to interconnect through the Council. Members' discourse suggests that cooperatives seek legitimacy within their ever-changing organizational field and the NCC's discourse offers a critical source of such endorsement for the cooperative movement. Accountability pressures can emerge from various stakeholders affected by the agriculture industry (e.g., environmental groups) and from political forces (e.g., regulatory agencies). These forces continually challenge cooperatives to demonstrate and defend their legitimacy. Members' discourse

suggests the Council plays an impression management role. Through the collection and dissemination of information, the Council attempts to influence how others see and evaluate cooperatives. While many participants were hesitant to use the terms “public relations” as they are often associated with shady practices, enhancing the profile of cooperatives with other actors in their organizational field is an important function of the Council. In one sense, the Council’s discourse serves a “framing” function (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) by managing meaning in such a way that environments are enacted (i.e., events socially constructed) to promote change in the best interests of cooperatives. To frame issues and promote values is also to affect images and identities (Cheney & Frenette, 1993; Heath, 1995; McMillan, 1987). Cheney & Vibbert argue that such symbolic management is particularly important when high levels of environmental uncertainty exist due to rapid changes like those characterizing the agricultural industry. Cooperative members rely on the Council’s rhetoric as a resource for justifying their form of organizing (i.e., identity construction) and explaining to ever-changing constituents why what they do is admirable and necessary (i.e., image management) (Fine, 1996). While the primary targets of the Council’s legitimacy efforts include “John Q. Public” and “Generation X farmers,” it is important to remember that the Council as boundary-spanner simultaneously represents the organization to the environment and the environment to the organization—or as suggested by Cheney and Vibbert (1986), public relations is “the art of adjusting organizations to environments and environments to organizations” (p. 394).

“John Q. Public”

Many of the Council’s legitimacy efforts focus on the statewide population that is becoming more urbanized and distanced from agriculture in general and cooperatives specifically. As suggested by one manager, “the Council just needs to continue educating John Q. Public.” Many interviewees shared their concerns about interacting with a public unaware of the plight of cooperatives and their members.

Times are changing. We are becoming a smaller percentage of the population. As urban people get farther away, generation wise, from the farm, their understanding of farms, of coops, of agriculture in general is distorted. They have a Norman Rockwell vision. And it’s just not accurate.

On the one hand, the construct of “John Q. Public” represents valuable stability (i.e., pride, strong work ethic) in popular perceptions of farming. John Q. Public has a “Norman Rockwell vision” of farming. Yet, cooperatives desire some changes, along with continuity, in popular perceptions. The discourse of the Council serves to manage the tensions surrounding this paradox. Cooperatives rely on the Council to create, in part, a more informed public having access to a variety of agricultural viewpoints including those of cooperatives. The uncertainty reduction function of talk is again illustrated in this subtheme. The Council’s discourse serves to reduce uncertainty, for the general public, about the role of cooperatives in the agricultural industry as the circumstances in which cooperatives exist change (e.g., more urbanized “John Q. Public”). In one sense, the Council participates in an ongoing “identity game” (Christensen & Cheney, 2000), on behalf of cooperatives, by

articulating, expressing, and celebrating cooperatives' identities. The Council's discourse also serves to reduce uncertainty, for cooperatives members, about potential changes in the circumstances in which cooperatives exist (e.g., more urbanized "John Q. Public").

The need for state-wide understanding of cooperatives and their legitimate role in the agriculture industry is magnified by concerns about the 2000 government census. In the millennium year a census is conducted, and as a result there will be a reapportionment of legislative districts. Many participants conveyed concern about "environmental uncertainty" (Thompson, 1967) created by the census and its potential outcomes. As production agriculture is becoming a smaller part of voting populace, cooperatives fear one result is not having a voice with Congress. Underscoring the need for the Council's efforts is members' belief that they need to shape as well as respond to social conditions influencing their organizations. Thus, the Council is not merely a boundary-spanner but a "boundary-controller" attempting to play an active role in shaping, not merely adapting to, the environment (Grunig, 1984).

Among other initiatives, the Council arranged for then Governor Ben Nelson to sign a proclamation in recognition of October as Cooperative Month during the fall of 1998. A ceremony was held at the state capitol in which representatives of cooperative organizations across the state participated. The purpose of Cooperative Month is to focus attention on the contributions cooperatives make to the economy and their commitment to helping communities prosper and grow. "This program [co-op month] provides us with an excellent opportunity to focus on the benefits of the cooperative way of doing business," shared one board director. The theme of this year's month was "Cooperatives—businesses people trust." As pressure for more efficiency in the agriculture industry pervades public discourse, advocacy about cooperatives and their democratic roots to external constituents such as John Q. Public becomes imperative. Certainly, tensions between the demands of a democratic workplace and the demands of the marketplace are reconcilable. But as the tensions continuously occur, they must be consciously and creatively addressed. Otherwise, producer cooperatives may fail economically while retaining their democratic principles or fail ideologically while retaining economic vitality. Subsequently, the Council becomes an "extension" of cooperatives and an impression manager in order to enhance the profile of cooperatives with the general public.

"Generation X Farmers"

Participants in this study collectively recognize that the changing demographics of the agriculture workforce have some consequence for the future of the cooperative movement. The notion of "Generation X farmer" is a social construct that has gained attention in cooperative circles and is interpreted as an important concern—a focal point that galvanizes interest, directs attention, and mobilizes resources. Throughout their discourse, members described younger producers as few and far between and less loyal to cooperatives. Less commitment to cooperatives is attributed to values associated with Generation X and a lack of understanding about the nature of and need for cooperatives.

Throughout their discourse, members described young producers as less loyal to the cooperative system.

I think you know like right now the younger farmers maybe don't have the commitment to their local coops that some of the older generations had. I think it's a sign of the times. I think sometimes younger folks are not committed too much, not to a school, a community, a wife, a coop. Twenty-five years ago there was an element of loyalty out there. Now when you deal with the younger farmers out there, it's more of what can this co-op do for me. It's bottom-line performance.

A lack of loyalty to community-based cooperatives was attributed by many participants to a generation, and its value system, fixated on the bottom line and profit. Participants also ascribed Generation X's lack of loyalty to cooperatives (as perceived by older members) as rooted in a lack of understanding of what cooperatives are, why they evolved, and how they operate. Farmers' lack of power in the marketplace was the primary impetus for legislation allowing producers of agriculture products to act together, in a cooperative manner, in the processing, handling, and marketing of their products (McBride, 1986). Farmers saw an important social need unfilled by conventional businesses and perceived an opportunity to create organizations embodying their democratic ideals. Thus, cooperatives emerged from a critique of the internal structure of mainstream organizations and the failure of these organizations to meet producers' social needs. It is this history that members of the Council believe young producers do not understand.

Importantly, the discourse about "Generation X farmers" illustrates the paradox of stability and change. The new generation of farmers will ultimately become "stability" for the cooperative movement but also represent a threat of change as they bring new orientations to the business of farming. By labeling them as "Generation X farmers," the co-op (primarily older members) can make sense of the paradox. They need younger members to provide ultimate continuity even though such members are perceived to be "different" and represent change. Participants' discourse framed the Generation X phenomenon as transitional—they may be "Gen X farmers" now but we can help them "see the light" concerning what cooperatives are really about. The label "Generation X farmers" serves to help cooperatives reframe the tensions surrounding demographic changes in cooperatives' membership.

The collective construction of the "Generation X farmer" is a mirror triggering action on the part of the Council. In other words, a gap between the identity of cooperatives and what members perceive is the image of cooperatives has led to attempts to reduce such dissonance. Cooperatives' image is important to its members. Image represents members' best guesses at what characteristics others are likely to ascribe to them. In response to the perceived need for legitimacy in the eyes of a younger generation of farmers, the Council has adopted several strategies. In hopes that patterns of action in response to environmental issues in turn modifies the environment, the Council is using a variety of impression and image management tactics to transform how Generation X perceives cooperatives without violating attributes that define cooperatives' core identities. Strategies range from public appearances by key industry representatives to farmer focus meetings, video presentations, and the creation and distribution of fliers. The Council has also developed extensive youth education programs. In the late 1980s, a teaching curriculum was developed by the Council and provided to secondary education instructors across the state. This curriculum

is updated yearly and distributed to agriculture, business, and marketing instructors. The Cooperative Activities Award Competition was initiated early in the Council's history, 1952, for FFA chapters and has continued for more than 45 years. In 1989, the Cooperative Speaking Competition was added to provide an incentive for young people to learn more about the cooperative form of organizing and develop communication skills. The Council also provides yearly scholarships to university students majoring in an agriculture-related field. The scholarship recipients are expected to attend one of the subdistrict meetings of the Council or the annual meeting.

The Council helps cooperatives come to grips with challenges stemming from perceptions about Generation X's lack of understanding and respect for their system of organizing. In order to gain their support, the Council helps cooperatives establish and maintain relationships with Generation X producers. The Council functions to inform and impress this key public with regard to cooperatives' policies, functions, ideals, and standards. The Council treats cooperatives as if they were products, positioning them with care within the agriculture industry while differentiating them from other forms of organizing. The Council's rhetoric functions as a socializing tool aimed at acculturating younger producers in the "value sets" that characterize cooperatives (Cheney & Frenette, 1993). In other words, the discourse operates by establishing and/or reinforcing particular value premises on which subsequent decisions are made. Through their youth education programs, the Council assists youth in understanding agricultural cooperatives and how they function with the hope of creating "identification" between younger producers and cooperatives (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Participants discussed the education of Generation X producers and future farmers as a necessary investment toward securing the future of the cooperative movement. The council's rhetoric does not represent mere "adaptation" on the part of cooperatives to a changing membership base; rather, the discourse tries to "enact" environmental-organizational linkages conducive to the changes desired by cooperatives (e.g., Gen X farmers' identification with cooperatives' mission).

The linguistic devices of "John Q. Public" and "Generation X farmers" illustrate how cooperative members' discourse reflects the paradox of stability and change and at the same time is a valuable resource for framing the paradox in ways that are productive. Older farmers want to hold onto the heritage of the cooperative movement and desire stability (i.e., "Generation X farmers") whereas they also want to change public perceptions about cooperatives (i.e., "John Q. Public") to be perceived as hip business people—the new version of old businesses "you can trust." The labels used by cooperative members when discussing various stakeholders may not be accidental. The notion of "John Q. Public" implies that external constituents are open to information, are malleable. That is a very different label than "city folk" which implies an unsolvable separation in perspective.

Theme 3: Protecting Interests

Over the past two decades, ever-changing regulatory conditions have extended into the day-to-day production, marketing, and delivery of agricultural goods and services. The more stringent and unstable a regulatory environment, the greater the need for effective integration and linkage with it (Oliver, 1990). The Council's discourse functions to manage uncertainty, on behalf of cooperatives, that pervades regulatory struggles. The Council is

responsible for identifying, tracking, analyzing, and prioritizing issues as well as formulating positions in response to them. Through these actions, the Council protects or buffers cooperatives from external threats, pressures, and environmental disturbances. The “core technology,” a phrase originally coined by Thompson (1967), of cooperatives is protected (i.e., stability) as the Council increases the cushion between them and their ever-changing environment.

Political and legal resources of large systems can more readily deal with rules and regulations of governmental agencies. Throughout their discourse, participants indicated that resource scarcity leads cooperatives to form the Council in order to exercise power on their behalf. As cooperatives exist in a stringent regulatory environment, the greater resources of the NCC function to understand, engage in “sense-making” about, regulatory issues better than they could alone. “There’s strength in numbers, you know. United we stand, divided we fall. We need to maintain that philosophy.” Monitoring the public policy arena to identify occurring trends which can demand a reorientation of cooperatives’ policies was described by many participants as increasing in importance. Several people attributed the complexity of legislative actions and speed of those changes as catalysts to prioritizing protection of cooperatives. While the importance of protecting cooperatives’ interests will surely fluctuate with the temper of the regulatory climate, interviewees overwhelmingly perceive greater reliance on the Council, in comparison to 55 years ago when the Council was created, as an “extension” of cooperatives in the legislative arena. “One of our priorities obviously is to protect the interests of cooperatives from the legislative and regulatory standpoint,” suggested one co-op manager. “That’s becoming more difficult in that regulations are very complex and often times very costly. And so our role in protecting cooperatives’ interests in that area is very important.” Two sub-themes based on metaphors provided by participants, “watchdog” and “voice,” provide more insight into how the Council discursively functions to protect cooperatives’ interests.

“Watchdog”

Observing legislative activities and discerning what developments could adversely affect the operating environment of cooperatives is an important self-preservation function served by the Council. Throughout their discourse, participants linked cooperatives’ ability to understand what issues are becoming salient to the “watchdog” role of the Council.

Basically, they are our watchdog. Watching, making sure that something doesn’t just get slipped by the legislature without us knowing about it. You know every once in a while you get some people that don’t like cooperatives. They like to put a law out there that in some way makes it so we are not on an even playing field with private companies. The Council watches out for this kinda action.

The watchdog metaphor used by many participants to describe the Council illustrates perceptions of increasing demand for an outside force to monitor and probe cooperatives’ environments in order to identify problems and opportunities. One of the motivating factors for the creation of the Council more than 50 years ago was cooperatives’ inability to handle legislative and political problems. Today, cooperatives still rely on the Council to

identify and monitor trends which may mature into public policy affecting the agriculture industry. Many participants believe they would stay uninformed about key issues affecting their organization if it were not for the Council's rhetorical efforts. The Council protects cooperatives' interests by monitoring a variety of policy issues ranging from ethanol production credits, fertilizer tax laws, grain warehousing and licensing, to a host of other issues. The President of the Council estimates that of the hundreds of bills introduced each session of the legislature, the Council monitors more than a hundred.

A key component of the issues monitoring role performed by the Council is its "filter function," the acquisition (i.e., shifting and sorting) and distribution of information necessary for cooperatives to make sense of their environments. Through legislative surveillance, the Council observes short-term political and social trends, evaluates their operational, social, and financial impacts, and promotes dialogue with cooperatives about these issues. The Council serves as a "watchdog," not just in the acquisition and distribution of information but in helping cooperatives understand what they need to do as a result of certain information. New regulations, which are often lengthy and technical in nature, have led the Council to hire outside experts in order to accurately interpret regulations for their members. In addition to informing their members of regulations, they help to ensure that cooperatives maintain compliance. Ensuring cooperative compliance with ever-changing state and federal regulations is perceived by members as a priority of the Council.

"Voice"

Many participants used the metaphor of "voice" to depict how they view the Council as protecting cooperatives' interests. The metaphor of voice highlights the importance of expression to cooperative members and illustrates how organizations are social institutions fulfilling multiple functions, including representation, for stakeholders (Haas & Deetz, 2000). To have a voice is to exercise the power to make your experiences be heard and understood (Putnam et al., 1996). The concern with voice often arises in cooperative circles due in part to perceptions that rural voices in general are unique and often ignored, silenced, or misunderstood. Farmers have values and political interests in need of representation and the Council's discourse functions to provide this representation.

The Council brings together a place for the cooperatives to have a voice perhaps mostly with the legislature. It's kind of a place to bring their ideas together so that they can speak and be heard. Have their opinion count somehow. Have some sort of say when laws come up that will affect them.

Members' discourse illustrates a belief that the Council is there to speak on behalf of cooperatives—present their case. Underlying this metaphor is the assumption that cooperative members' standpoints are often silenced. The Council's rhetoric serves an empowerment function by providing a voice for authentic communication about members' genuine interests and cooperative experiences. While the metaphor of "watchdog" highlights the importance of monitoring issues, the "voice" metaphor foregrounds the active

role of the Council in position development and advocacy—championing the cooperative movement.

In performing its advocate role, the Council prioritizes cooperative policy issues, constructs an industry stance, and creates strategy options. Operating as a voice for members across the state, the Council wards off potential threats to the cooperative movement. The importance of public opinion to the operation of organizations is not new. But cooperatives are now being politicized in ways they haven't previously experienced. Cooperatives, through the Council, are articulating their positions more clearly and urgently to governmental agencies and other critical audiences. In addition to warding off threats, participants rely on the Council to help make the strain of current regulations manageable. Making a difference through voice aptly describes the role of the Council in interfacing with external actors on behalf of cooperatives. Through the Council, cooperatives are able to add a new voice and perhaps change existing asymmetries. "We have a bigger voice through the Council. A bigger voice that says this is an issue for coops across the state. 100 coops—now that's a little more clout," shared one man. "But York by itself or Shelby by itself, we would just end up being like the sheep following the gilts along. The Council protects us from that."

An important aspect of the voice metaphor is access (Putnam et al., 1996). Members of cooperatives rely on the Council to provide access for their voices to be heard. However, several members of the Council's Board of Directors indicated it was becoming increasingly difficult to provide such access. These difficulties led the Council to create a committee this past spring to investigate the option of forming a political action committee (PAC).

To me it's an access issue. Strictly an access issue. I want to make sure we have an opportunity to get in there and tell the cooperative's story. It has nothing to do with buying votes. What it does is give me an opportunity to go talk to those urban legislators who drive down here, who don't even go to their office, they go right to the floor of the legislature, and when they're done with business for the day, they get back in their cars and leave.

Many board members linked the possibility of a PAC with accessibility. The dialogue surrounding the potential formation of a PAC illustrates a desire on the part of cooperative members to be empowered—to have their voices be heard and respected. Participants' discourse also revealed hesitations in associating their organizations with committees often perceived as distorting voices. PACs provide an alternative form of communication potentially providing access for cooperatives; however, they could also undermine bona fide efforts of making a difference through voice. The connection between power and voice is no clearer than in members' discussion of the possible need for a PAC. Importantly, some interviewees insightfully discussed that PACs are a potential avenue for expression that can lead to domination and distortion.

As both "watchdog" and "voice," there exists a synergism surrounding the work of the Council as it reaches beyond traditional boundaries of cooperatives. The approach of the Council helps external audiences understand the role of cooperatives in the agriculture

industry and in society and analyze the ramifications of alternative approaches to regulation. To encourage significant public support, cooperatives are doing more than defending themselves against attack. Through the Council, cooperatives are able to reach out and participate effectively with critical outside constituencies.

Discussion

Many scholars have presented theoretical arguments about the potential importance of cooperative support organizations such as the Nebraska Cooperative Council in sustaining democratic ideology and practice (e.g., Cheney, 1995; Cornforth et al., 1988; Rothschild-Whitt & Whitt, 1986), yet little empirical data have existed with which to provide an in-depth understanding of the day-to-day functioning of such support organizations. These results make a significant contribution toward an understanding of how cooperatives' options can be expanded by support organizations and their boundary-spanning activities. By providing networks of learning, promoting the legitimacy of cooperative forms of organizing, and protecting cooperatives' interests, the Council is an entity helping cooperatives reconcile their internal requirements for democracy with the external demands of the ever-changing marketplace and of other institutions on which they depend. Clearly, the results suggest that "democracy" and "participation" cannot be fully understood within the confines of organizations. Rather, the study highlights the boundary-spanning aspects of participatory organizational forms by exploring how the Council, on behalf of its constituent cooperatives, enacts interorganizational linkages supportive of democratic ideologies.

The results suggest the CSOs serve at least a two-part function for cooperatives. First and foremost, they offer a support structure. They provide mechanisms through which information can be collected, made sense of, and disseminated, position statements can be created, policies can be debated, and education efforts can be enacted. Second, they serve as discourse communities where members have a safe haven to discursively make sense of inherent tensions and contradictions of organizing. Importantly, the CSOs' dual functions of support and discourse are both necessary for maintaining cooperatives' viability and democratic identities. Previous literature points to the importance of CSOs as a "buffer" between cooperatives and mainstream organizations (e.g., Abell, 1988; Cornforth, Thomas, Lewis, & Spear, 1988; Cheney, 1995). The data reported here clearly support these arguments. By serving as "watchdog" and "voice," the Council enacts environmental linkages that strategically position cooperatives in the agricultural industry. However, this study highlights an equally important role for CSOs—providing space for discursively managing tensions. Several themes point to how the discourse of the Council functions to reduce uncertainty surrounding changing circumstances in which cooperatives are situated (e.g., John Q. Public) and changing membership of cooperatives (e.g., Generation X farmers). Through their education and legitimacy efforts, the Council helps cooperatives maintain their participatory spirit (i.e., stability) while being open to innovation and change. Additionally, the discourse of the Council functions to create identification between key stakeholders (e.g., John Q. Public, Generation X farmers) and the cooperative movement.

This study also contributes to extant literature on boundary-spanners and research about change. The results highlight an important role of the Council as a boundary-spanner helping cooperatives manage the paradox of stability and change. The discourse of the Council functions to enact the larger environment in which cooperatives exist by "making sense" (Weick, 1979) of and "framing" (Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996) innovation and change while protecting cooperatives' "core technologies" (e.g., democratic ideologies) (Thompson, 1967). The role of boundary-spanners as change agents merits more attention in future research as well as the uncertainty reduction function of support organizations' discourse. Furthermore, these findings point to the importance of understanding change as negotiated in "nets of collective action" (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 32) as well as in focal organizations. Subsequently, future research should investigate change as it occurs in extra-organizational environments by various stakeholders including focal organizations.

There are limitations to the findings. Most of the members of the participating cooperatives were white, middle-class, college-educated, male United States citizens, thereby representing the dominant United States' culture. Not surprisingly, the issues dealt with in this project are deeply embedded in cultural beliefs and practices. Therefore, some of the communication patterns observed in the Council may not translate to groups consisting of different ethnicities, classes, and educational levels. This limitation is made salient by some unanswered questions. There were a couple of circumstances which kept presenting themselves but which did not get full attention due to the setting of the study and research design. First, the gender mix of the groups may be significant. The setting of the current study did not permit raising or addressing questions about the gendered nature of organizing in cooperative movements. Also, this study was conducted with a fairly homogeneous set of cooperatives, albeit participants did express how changing demographics were threatening the system's homogeneity. Nevertheless, there is a tremendous variety of democratic groups attempting to operate, including smaller support groups, food cooperatives, etc. Based on the study's current findings, it is likely that complexity of the democratic organization, both economically and in terms of its members, imposes different sets of constraints upon cooperative support organizations. Additionally, the research design structured data collection from leaders in local cooperatives. While such leaders are also currently farmers being served by the Council, it would be interesting to expand the research design and gather data from the "rank and file" of cooperatives across the state of Nebraska. For instance, it would be interesting to interview "Generation X" farmers about their experiences with cooperatives and the Council.

Literature on organizational socialization would serve as a fruitful framework for work exploring how the Council, and other cooperative support organizations, function in helping members cultivate an understanding and appreciation for democracy as well as a sense of collective efficacy. Participants cited the Council's educational efforts as primary vehicles for developing the ideological grounding necessary for members to operate with a democratic consciousness. Future research is needed to examine in detail the assimilation processes that unfold as new members encounter the programs sponsored by the Council.

Participants overwhelmingly described the Council as enabling the cooperative movement across the state to succeed. In fact, it was extremely difficult to identify ways the Council potentially constrained the movement, even if unintentionally. It is possible the

participants are unaware of the Council's oppressive potential. It is also possible that constraining discourse could be better identified through participant observations. Critical theory, coupled with ethnographic methods, could be used to draw out and elicit the ways in which ideology (and discourse) serves as a source of disempowerment for members and perhaps serves the interests of some individuals and/or cooperatives more than others. For instance, we were struck by how interviewees at times referred to themselves as "managers," running business and corporations. In a sense, it appears that members have adopted language from mainstream institutions to describe their own activities even though they consider their cooperative form of organizing as distinct from traditional organizing methods. This adoption of language associated with the ideology of managerialism (Deetz, 1992) could be a form of discourse that emerges from how the cooperatives and the Council manage boundaries with external organizations. Perhaps members of cooperatives emulate the dominant organizational model to ensure their economic survival. The pragmatic consequences of such discourse need to be further explored in future research.

The results support previous arguments that farmers and non-farmers (e.g., "John Q. Public") constitute unique co-cultures (Higgins, 1991). The participants of this project clearly view the lay public as unaware of and uninformed about agriculture in general and cooperatives specifically. Our observations suggest that the Council actively seeks out opportunities to educate "John Q. Public" about agriculture in general and cooperative specifically. In fact, it became clear that the Council viewed this project as one such opportunity for reciprocal learning. Additionally, the results suggest that subcultures may exist within the agriculture industry (i.e., "Generation X farmers"). Future research designs should include younger producers as well as nonfarmers in attempts to better understand "cultural" relations between farmers and nonfarmers.

Practical Implications

Isolated groups have a high probability of failure (Putnam and Stohl, 1990). Our country's historical landscape is cloaked with remnants of producer cooperatives, initiated with the greatest of hope, that did not survive. In fact, the long-term survival of producer cooperatives is punctuated with problems, and democracy is often short-lived (Cheney, 2000). We know that external vertical systems pressure democratic organizations toward an increasing hierarchy (e.g., Farrell, 1995; West, 1993). The question then is what kind of environment do cooperatives, and other nontraditional organizations, need in order to maintain their democratic commitments over time—or "authenticity" as described by Cheney (1995)? This project suggests the work of the Council allows cooperatives to intersect with key publics and manage the paradox of stability and change while protecting their core democratic identities. Practically speaking, the results point to the importance of support systems for sustaining democratic values either in alternative organizational structures or participation programs in larger bureaucratic institutions. These cooperatives rely primarily on external structures (i.e., the Council) to instill cooperative values in their membership and other stakeholders. The Council's discourse takes the form of education initiatives, legitimacy efforts, and policy initiatives to protect interests. These are practical strategies for

managing the paradox of stability and change and managing interorganizational relationships. Other alternative organizations or coordinators of participation programs within existing bureaucracies may need to rely on different strategies.

This study is grounded in the notion that the way individuals talk about events, issues, and institutions provides knowledge about their beliefs, actions, and world view and ultimately into the process through which they make sense of their experiences. In sum, individuals' rhetoric defines their realities. For instance, an analysis of metaphors (e.g., "voice," "watchdog") used by participants to describe the Council yielded insights into how the Council is perceived as buffering and protecting cooperatives. The collective construction of "Generation X Farmer" provides farmers with a way of understanding and managing the paradox of stability and change as manifest in demographic changes in membership. Structuring concepts through metaphor, however, is to highlight certain aspects of the concept and hide certain other aspects. The construct "Generation X Farmer" as used by older farmers refers to a group of individuals who do not understand the value of cooperative forms of organizing in agriculture and who are concerned only with the profit-maximizing capabilities of organizations. While this certainly may be true of some younger farmers, this construct and its use may alienate potential members of cooperatives. Furthermore, the construct in context fails to recognize that as the education level of the workforce in general, and in agriculture specifically, increases, there is increasing demand on the part of workers to "participate" in the daily decision-making that affects their work lives (Barker, 1999). One practical implication of this work, then, is the need for cooperative members to understand the constitutive nature of language and reflect on additional and/or alternative ways of "framing" the issue of stability and change as manifest in demographic changes in younger producers.

The practical value of this project also reveals itself through its insights, applicable to all organizations, on ways to manage the paradox of stability and change. Berg and Smith (1990) and Handy (1995) argue that overly rational attempts to either reconcile or categorize change tend to suppress the paradoxical tension that could give meaning to the change process. Rather, we should encourage workers to stay with the paradox and discover links that give meaning to opposing forces. Another thing to be learned from this case study is the importance of managerial recognition of individual and organizational defense mechanisms against anxiety and uncertainty that, at a largely unconscious level, structure and form managerial and organizational responses to change. The Council is a boundary-spanning organization that helps cooperatives manage uncertainty and tensions surrounding change and the equally important desire for stability. It is quite possible that boundary-spanners (e.g., public relations specialists) for mainstream organizations also serve similar functions. Future research should investigate this possibility. From a practical standpoint, practitioners can be trained to understand the nature of paradoxes as powerful aspects of organizational life and possible strategies (e.g., education) for managing the tensions.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study leads us closer toward the question, "how can we change society so that it may support democratic ways of organizing?" Organizational communication

scholars must continue to go beyond the confines of organizational structures and include in their research programs the wider patterns of society which may ultimately destroy or support democratic forms of organizing. The ideas, interpretations, and heuristic merit of the current project represent a research program to be developed over the next few years. Furthermore, the findings suggest the value of potential mechanisms (e.g., training about democratic consciousness) through which practitioners can enable nontraditional organizations to maintain their alternative ideologies and economically survive. Finally, participatory ideologies can certainly still serve as a point of reference for our personal, professional, and societal decision-making even though democratic organizing may be unattainable in all its features.

Acknowledgments – Lynn M. Harter is an assistant professor at Minnesota State University–Moorhead; Kathleen J. Krone is an associate professor at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. This study is based upon the first author’s doctoral dissertation conducted under the direction of the second author. The data collection was funded by a grant provided by the Edith and Robert Day Foundation. The authors gratefully acknowledge the substantive feedback provided by Dan O’Hair and three anonymous reviewers. This article is dedicated to the Nebraska Cooperative Council for their support of the cooperative movement.

Note

1. Bureaucracy denotes a classical organization paradigm with enduring influence on the design and practice of many contemporary workplaces (Harrison, 1994). We use the term broadly in referring to institutions characterized by hierarchy of authority, division of labor, technical qualifications for hiring and promotion, formalized rules and procedures for behavior, and/or impersonal relationships. Just as Weber predicted early in this century, bureaucracy has come to be the dominant form of organization in every sector/industry in our culture (Cheney, Mumby, Stohl, Harrison, 1997). While bureaucracy is not directly opposed to the spirit of democracy, and in fact, offers a system of opportunities for individuals based on rational criteria, its prevalence and rigidity tend to limit possibilities for creative expression and the achievement of the deep mutual understanding required for consensus-building. Extant literature argues that bureaucratic structures feminize managers, workers, and clients with hierarchies and rigid rules that enforce subordination, dependence, and powerlessness (Ashcraft, 2000; Ferguson, 1985).

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Appendix A: Table of Significant Statements

Core Themes and Subthemes	Significant Statements
Paradox of Stability and Change	<p>Times are changing. I've been here 26 years, I can tell you a lot about co-ops. Not all changes are good but that's just the way it is. We've gotta adapt.</p> <p>I feel like we are in pretty good shape keeping up with technological changes. But that target is always a moving target, always changing. You think you've got focused in on it, and something advances like GPS. Everything has just become more complicated.</p> <p>Certainly trying to keep up with the changing regulatory environment is a challenge as far as the ability for local cooperatives to compete.</p> <p>As things change, with competition and the price of grain where it is, we're starting to see, ah, you know, our philosophies are probably changing a little bit too.</p> <p>We need to adapt to changes so that the cooperative system can remain of value to its member producer, yet we need to maintain our cooperative spirit, what makes us unique and special.</p> <p>We all get very comfortable with what we are doing and sometimes we are forced into change and the change is a little different and we have to just step back and take a moment, be open-minded, be at peace with ambiguity knowing we will reach that comfort zone again.</p>
Networks of Learning	<p>Probably the biggest benefit I've had being with the Council is that I'm able to get to know people across the state, producers and managers. Just the network, the personal contacts made with others is invaluable.</p> <p>It [the Council] provides a good venue for producers and managers to get together . . . there's a tremendous amount of changes going on out there and the faster we can spread information about those, probably the stronger it makes the co-ops.</p>
Locus of Innovation	<p>It's working together on mutually beneficial kinds of issues that's very very important, I think, to cooperatives. And that's what our Council and our education programs do. They perform as an extension to the cooperative in ways we would not be able to do independently.</p> <p>We look to the Council to be our educator. We do a certain amount of this internally but more times than not when we have a new director come on our board, he may be an excellent farmer but know nothing about cooperative organizing. This is where the Council performs an important education function for us.</p>
Avoiding Stagnation	<p>It's neat seeing how people look at things in different ways. It removes a lot of the staleness cause we all get a little stale.</p> <p>It's easy to become complacent—oh we've been doing this for years, why should we change?</p>
Promoting Legitimacy	<p>As agriculture gets smaller in numbers of people and we actually become a minority, people are just farther away from it. The Council helps educate the general public.</p> <p>The Council educates common people about agriculture and co-op issues. Well, for instance, Roundup Ready beans. You know there's this big misperception, you know about engineering and genetics, that this is a bad thing. And it really isn't.</p>

- John Q. Public
- We need to continue educating people in the cities. We've always believed there is a need for co-ops to be upfront on issues that concern them. If we don't do it, nobody else will.
- As we continue to deal with a population shift, we're getting less of a rural population. And, you know eastern Nebraska is different than western Nebraska. And we need to make sure the public understands what cooperatives are and how they work.
- I think it's anybody's guess right now how they will draw the legislative lines. But a strong bet is that there's gonna be less rural legislative districts. And that constitutes a strong challenge for us politically.
- Generation X Farmers
- The Council needs to continue getting out there and telling our story. Right now we've got a real need to get our younger producers out there so that they can understand really the value of cooperatives. The 50- to 55-year-old still remembers his father telling him you know how co-ops helped him. But we're not getting that down to the 30-year-old producer out there. The Council needs to continue and try to inform them just what coops can do for them.
- I think you know that younger farmers don't have the commitment to their local co-ops that some of the older generation had. I think it's a sign of the times. I think sometimes younger folks are not committed to much, not to a school, a community, a wife, a co-op.
- Twenty-five years ago, there was an element of loyalty out there; it's more of what can this co-op do for me. It's bottom-line performance.
- Younger farmers tend to be more aggressive. More bottom-line oriented. More price conscious. And the co-op isn't always the cheapest on every product, every time. He's worried about money in the short term. The here and now. And so, ultimately, he's less loyal to the co-op.
- Protecting Interests
- Talk about people being unaware of what an organization does for someone. So many of our patrons have no idea of the importance of the Nebraska Cooperative Council and what they've done. How they've saved them through the years. Something comes up that may have had a huge impact on our patrons and, you know, the council got the bill sidelined and written correctly. Our co-op council has been the watchdog for Nebraska's farmers and ranchers. If we don't take care of things ourselves, no one else is going to. And that's our co-op council.
- I don't think there's any way a local co-op could spend the effort, the dollars, the manpower, the expertise—especially in the legislative arena. There's just no way they can do that. But by pooling our efforts together, as state cooperatives, there's just power in numbers.
- Watchdog
- Basically, they are our watchdog. Watching, making sure that something doesn't just get slipped by the legislature without us knowing about it. You know every once in a while you get some people that don't like cooperatives. They like to put a law out there that in some ways makes it so we are not on an even playing field with private companies. The Council watches out for this kinda action.
- The thing I appreciate about the Council is what they do for us as far as the legislative watchdog. There are so many bills and so many different viewpoints about all kinds of things. And I feel that the

Council does an outstanding job of making sure we are aware of these things.

They look into laws that come into legislation, you know. And I think that's a very important part of the Council. Because we as individual co-ops and farmers can't be down there [in Lincoln] looking at everything that comes down the legislative pipe. The co-op council watches all that for us.

Voice

To have a Council to represent us and speak for us, it's important. We have enough things on our plates out here, it wouldn't work for us to be there.

As we move more and more towards an urban legislature, through the Council we try to keep a rural voice in the legislature. And that's gonna get even more important in terms of what the Council does for us.

They [the Council] often have to go in there and put out small fires before they get big. There's many a bad bill that would have been passed had it not been for the Council.

Well, a lot of independents don't like cooperatives cause we cut into their profit. So they like to set up laws that benefit only themselves and don't benefit the customer or anybody else down the road. And so we need the Council to continue being our voice so to speak and try to prevent that from happening.
