

“Let us Tell a Story Anew” – Aspects of Continuity, Discontinuity and Life-Giving in Organizational Narratives of Self.

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Outline

"Let us tell a story anew. And let us see how much we knew." These are the opening lines of the 2014 Hollywood movie *Maleficent* which tells – so the announcements – the untold story of *Cinderella*. This side of the story unfolds from a new organization of thoughts, altered identity construction and changed images of self. The reorganization leads to a different course of events and ultimately to a different ending than that of the well-known story we hold in our collective awareness. The outcome of the demonstrated reorganization is a different happy ending; one that seems to create a deeper form of harmony, peace and well-being for everyone due to the deliberate collective effort to change the current reality by narrating it in a different way.

Building on the same notion, I would like to dedicate my doctoral research to gaining a deeper understanding about how changing our organizational narratives can lead to a collectively experienced changed reality. The underlying post-modern understanding of the way we narrate our experiences may influence our experience, and vice versa, has been well adapted by the fields of Organizational Development and Psychology, (e.g. Gonçalves, & Machado, 2000; Czarniawska, 1997, 2013; Boje, 1991, 1995, 2009, 2012; Gabriel, 1991, 1995, 2000; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004; Bateson, C. 1990; Bateson, G. 1972, 1980). Much of the research focuses on how sensemaking, identity and constructed social reality (e.g. Weick, 1969, 1988, 1993, 1995) influence the overall organizational life, how the images we hold of our organization shape vital features such as organization design or leadership (Morgan, 2006), and how understanding organizations as a social construct of multiple narrations influences our current change management initiatives (Boje, 2012, Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004).

In times of unprecedented economic, ecological and sociological crisis, my particular area of interest focuses on what forms of narratives of “self” provide an enlivening experience for the collective; an experience, which empowers the group to overcome possible experiences of traumatic discontinuities by transforming them into an experience of continuity and appreciation. (Bateson, C., 1990; Thatchenkery, 2005, Thatchenkery & Metzger, 2006, Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

I hypothesize that organizations that are able to maintain narratives about their own identity and purpose that collectively integrate unforeseen negative events as part of a continuous “bigger story” are better equipped to deal with the complex reality of crisis. I therefore argue that actively working on the nature of an organization’s narratives of self can be as beneficial as working on changing procedures and organizational structures. As I define organization as any form of organized human interaction, the research may apply to groups of any definition, background or size.

I am basing my research on five theoretical pillars: 1.) that reality is a social construct 2.) that Fisher’s (1984) paradigm of the *homo narrans* as understanding humans to construct their experiences through narration is a form of knowing which succumbs all other forms of knowing 3.) that an organization is based on the principle of multi-vocality (Boje, 1991, 1995, 2009). Thereby it provides an abundance of simultaneous stories that no one person or group of people can ever fully understand. 4.) that language and narration is performative and constitutive. Narrating, therefore, is not only a means of transporting information, but also an action that can be transformative in nature (e.g. Becker, 1991, Bateson, C. 1990, Bateson, G. 1972, 1980) 5.) that appreciating the positive in the negative can help provide a platform for facilitating transformative experiences (e.g. Thatchenkery, 2013).

Based on Nietzsche’s (1874 as quoted in Boje, 1990) notion that an “excess of history” leads to a block of creative focus in our organizations, I am currently channeling my attention to how organizations construct their image of self over time. Building on Boje (1990), I distinguish between defying organizational narratives, preservative narratives and enlivening narratives.

Preservative narratives bring the past into the present as a frozen relict: remembering styles of past leaders, the way things were, glorifying the perceived organizational values. A defying organizational narrative does not aim to keep the past or the present alive but strives to overcome it. In a defying collective construction, everything the organization stands for is considered outdated and has to be renewed. Both preservative and defying organizational narratives can have a static and negative impact on the organization. Both come with a clear mission to either preserve

and glorify the past or to change or eliminate everything from the past. Both types of narratives have a tendency to stifle attempts by members of an organization to create innovative strategies.

Enlivening narratives are of a different nature. Regardless of their content, they energize the organization and its people to increase and enliven action. In general, an organization lives and thrives on a healthy balance of all three types of narratives, often with varying foci on one type matching the requirements of a specific department or unit over the predominance of another type.

However, once a consistent narrative has formed to predominantly inform the organization as a whole, it is often difficult to influence. Noticing which kinds of narratives shape the mind-set of the organization as a whole may provide a healthy basis that empowers the organization to collectively strive towards reorganizing their thoughts, actions and narratives about what and who they are to give their organization new life for the future (Boje, 2009).

To continue with my thought process, it would be helpful for me to further understand: 1) How to best capture organizational narratives, analyze them and bring them into the collective awareness 2) How to demonstrate the relevance of the interaction between narratives and change 3) The exact nature of the organizational narratives we can ultimately distinguish. 4) What the actual components of enlivening narratives are.

I would like to use the CMM Learning Exchange 2014 for introducing my research question, up-to-date findings and for receiving the highly appreciated feedback from peers, friends and colleagues. I am hoping that my contribution will help further our understanding of the life-giving and creative space that emerges between the stability of existing roles and the uncertain dynamics of an unfolding narrative (Goffmann, 1981).

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