

WORK IN PROGRESS

Maintenance and Transformation of Organizational Meta-Narratives of Identity

Erika Jacobi

Fielding Graduate University

Introduction

Many theories seek to describe how change in organizations takes place. Based on how much human agency one ascribes to play a role in the process, Bennis (1966) differentiates between theories of change and theories of changing. Theories of change analyze the motors of change in organizations, whereas theories of changing examine the manageability of organizational change (Poole & Van de Ven, 2004). While both traditions enjoy vibrant discourse, another line of research has emerged which looks at how change manifests in organizational life. As narratives reflect how human beings organize their perception of reality (e.g. McIntyre, 1981, Schütz, 1973, Czarniawska, 1997, Fisher 1970, Ricoeur, 1981 Lyotard, 1979, Brown 1987) and thus can give us an insight into how change is constructed and made meaning of by the collective, the research of organizational narratives has gained considerable impact in organizational theory.

The analysis of organizational narratives mostly focuses on how narratives relate to the concept of reality (Czarniawska, 1997 Bruner, 1986), how their performance unfolds in organizational life (Boje, 1991, 1995, 2009), how organizations can be seen as an enacted narratives in themselves (Czarniawska, 1997, Boje, 1995) and which methodologies may be best applied to retrieve research-relevant information from narratives (e.g. Greimas, 1973, 1989, 1990, Renoir, et al., 1988 as quoted in Gonçalves & Machado, 2000). However, the question which factors may help transform narratives as such has been given little relevance in organization theory so far.

In the following brief introductory, I would like to explore which factors may help transform Organizational Meta-Narratives of Identity (OMNI), i.e. the narratives that an organization tells as a collective about its own state, identity and outlook on the future. I consider the question relevant based on Watzlawick's (1978) and other's theories that if language and narratives are a representation of our perceived reality, changing the way we narrate can directly influence the way we organize our reality. This, in turn, has an effect on reality itself. In other words: Looking at how organizational narratives can be transformed, might add another layer of

depth to the question of how organizational change can be evoked. As the topic has been hardly explored from an organizational development perspective, I will borrow from the vast spectrum of literature in human psychology. I understand organizational narratives of identity as any kind of narrative produced on any level of the organization that reports, reflects on or seeks to define the state the organization is perceived to be in.

Narration as a form of organizing

“We are a conversation.” (Heidegger, 1949, p. 278): Based on Heidegger’s and other existentialist propositions, Fisher (1984) establishes narratives as one of the main means of human meaning-making and meaning-giving. He proposes the “Homo Narrans” as a paradigm that subsumes all others. Narratives reveal the way we organize our thoughts, the way we structure our experiences. Thereby, the benefit of analyzing narratives does not lie in uncovering a potential factuality. Contrarily, the relevance reveals itself through the narrative presentation (Polkinghorne, 1987), through a unique sequenciality which carries information regardless of its level of truth or falsity (Bruner, 1990). The benefit of narratives lies in their obscurity (Czarniawska, 1997) and in their “indifference to extra-linguistic reality” (Bruner, 1990, p. 40). Narratives give us access to the personal or organizational construction of what is and thus of the personal or organizational sensemaking.

Bakhtin (1981) elucidates that all language or thought is dialogical. This means that any produced language only exists in response to the things that have been said before and in anticipation of things that will be said in response. All language and its reflected ideas are dynamic, relational and engaged in a process of endless re-descriptions of the world. Therefore, understanding the world through narrative concepts leads to and is based on understanding reality as a social construct which we co-create, shape, reshape or deconstruct through contextualization or verbalization (e.g. Czarniawska, 1997, Watzlawick, 1978). The narrative presentation can be three-fold: Presentation of the stories to oneself, to others or as a receptor (Polkinghorne, 1987, p. 19). Based on this differentiation, we can distinguish further subcategories. As for the

presentation of narratives to oneself, further subcategories may be for example: a) thoughts that a person tells oneself about themselves b) thoughts that a person tells oneself about others; c) thoughts that a person tells oneself about the organization d) thoughts which reconstruct what others tell about themselves to oneself. In my research, I am particularly interested in what I would like to define as *Meta-Narratives of Identity* (MNI) meaning the narratives that a person tells themselves about their own state, personality, outlooks in life. The equivalent for organizations would then be *Organizational Meta-Narratives of Identity* (OMNI) signifying narratives – whether phrases, stories, or only utterances – that an organization forms as a collective about their own state, personality and outlooks or opportunities. “This organization stands for innovation” would be one example; “We are never going to make it out of this crisis” another. OMNI’s are fundamentally different from stories as they lack a plot, a story line, characters and a dramatic course. OMNI’s also differ from marketing, employer or employee branding, which are consciously constructed by one part of the organization in order to either influence the organization as a collective (employer branding) or influence the customers, stakeholders and direct environment of the organization (marketing, employee branding). Boje (1995) understands narratives as the collective experience that allows all participants to substitute their own memory with that of the collective. Thus marketing, branding and even directives, policies, rules and regulations of the organization may feed organizational narratives and OMNI’s but usually not vice versa. While the marketing, directives, and branding are planned acts, the formation of an organizational narrative or OMNI’s as one of their subgroups is not planned and therefore can be classified as part of the uncontrollable side of an organization (Gabriel, 1995).

The benefits of understanding how OMNI’s are formed, maintained and transformed are considerable: If we gain a deeper access to the subconscious collective meaning making about the state of the organization it provides us with a powerful assessment tool for understanding the discrepancies between the established collective sense-making of an organization and the reality it may be facing. Tapping into the discrepancy that unfolds from there, we can ask the question

under which circumstances the organization can use this space either to entirely innovate their own state, change it in parts or leave it as is. Based on many of Watzlawick's (1978) theories, cybernetics or quantum physics, transformed organizational narratives in general and OMNI's in particular will affect a changed reality in the course of it. The difficulty self-evidently lies in gaining access to this sub-conscious, and uncontrollable data and understanding how – once accessed - can influence the uncontrollable. If we manage to tap into the uncontrollable realm of an organization and understand how to transform the thought and organization of reality about the perceived state of the organization, we can follow the dynamics that unfold between the “stability of roles” and the uncertainty of the unfolding narrative” (Goffmann, 1981) to see innovation and transformation emerge.

Group specific narratives

In order to later discuss how problematic OMNI's can be transformed, I would first like to dwell on the question how they are birthed and maintained. Gonçalves and Machado (2000) managed to give an impressive insight into how narratives form group-specifically. Their study across five groups of members with varying substance addictions revealed each group showing specific narratives that were distinctive from each other by various criteria oftentimes containing easily distinguishable group-specific symbols. The sample group encompassed 20 depressive, 11 anorexic, 24 agoraphobic, 18 drug dependent and 20 alcoholic participants. The authors collected what "significant life" stories and analyzed them by Renoir's et al "qualitative grounded methodologies" (1988, as quoted in Gonçalves & Machado, 2000, p. 353). Participants were guided through a structured interview that focused on stimulating image-based recall of various life events. The authors categorized the data in the seven narrative grammar components of: setting, initiating event, internal response, goal, actions, outcome, ending. They further distinguished meaning clusters and grouped them hierarchically. Out of those they formed a narrative prototype and gave these prototype narratives to a respectively sized control group who were to rate on a 5-scale Leikert scale how much the narrative was plausible as a life-event.

The authors found that each group had very distinguished narratives with noticeably different emotional subtopics. Thus, to name only one example, the prototype narrative of the drug-addict always took place in a public place and was described as triggered by an uncontrollable event. The individuals tried to avoid the painful situation in order to continue to seek pleasure. All action seemed externally controlled. The outcome of the story was that everything stayed the same which the people experienced as a loss of control and social connectedness.

Based on this study, Gonçalves and Machado (2000) argue that different psychological disorders may be differentiated by form of prototype narratives. That emotional narrative prototype seems to develop out of existing conversation communities where certain ways of emotional telling form predominant primary modes of perception. The results of their follow-up study, discussed in the same article, further indicated a correlation between an increase of diversity and complexity in the participants' narratives and therapeutic success. The authors thereby argue that psychopathology can be understood in terms of lack of emotional narrative flexibility.

That groups form narratives is a broadly-studied phenomenon in organizational development as well. However, the perspective of the discussion strikes me as different. While a number of organizational studies focus on how narratives influence the state and success of an organization (e.g. Geiger & Antonacopoulou's, 2009, Flosi, 2009, Boje 1991, 1995) and others look at how specific narratives are being brought about by the organization and how the influence its success (Boje, 1991, 1995) to my knowledge there are no studies available that show how the state of the organization influences the group-specific narrative structure of the organization. In most of the current organizational theory studies organizational narratives are seen and analyzed in their entire flux and under the understanding that there is multi-vocality (Boje, 1995) in every organization that makes it difficult for any one person or group to ever understand the organization as a whole. While this is undoubtedly an important aspect of organizational life, Gonçalves and Machado's (2000) study may point towards the direction that if that multi-vocality freezes and the

narratives, especially, the narratives that reveal the perception of one's own state, emotions, aspirations, hopes and personality, it may reveal a psychotic state that is distinguishable from group to group by their narrative reflection. If a group specific one-dimensional narrative can be seen as a sign of a psychotic state of an organization, we would be able to see specific repetitive scripts in the way they define their particular state, organizational identity and outlook as a collective at times when the collective additionally and simultaneously reports of their overall state as negative. A cross-sector study of the narrative structure of organizations that are in a self-described negative state in comparison to a control group of cross-sector organizations that are in a self-described positive state could potentially be a start in investigating whether Gonçalves and Machado, (2000) findings are similarly reflected in organizational life.

Transformation of problematic narratives of self

If groups form specific OMNI's and their being problematic can be characterized by a one-dimensional, recurrent dominant narrative structure, the question is also how the repetition and one-dimensional structure can be broken up and transformed to the flux and multi-vocality (Boje, 1995) that potentially reflects a more vibrant and dynamic organizational life. There are ample approaches as to how to transform frozen thought and self-narration processes: Watzlawick (1978) proposes that the language of change resides in the language of imagery, in the metaphor, in the *pars pro toto* right side of the brain that has the power to diversify the very specialized perception of the left side of the brain. The reframing of a frozen, narrow and possibly fixated perspective can take place by a dialogical interplay between our "two languages" (Watzlawick, 1978, p. 13) that correlate with the two sides of the brain. While the one side or language seeks to specify and narrow the perceived reality down, the metaphorical, *pars pro toto* side is built to diversify its meaning. From Watzlawick's (1978) perspective, diversification of the potential meaning lies the change for transformation. To options of diversifying the fixated narrative, world view or language are infinite: Reframes towards seeing the good in the bad or in everything that is, is one

option (Cooperrider, 1990, Thatchenkery, 2005, 2011, 2013, Thatchenkery, T. J. & Metzker, C. 2006), another is to focus more on the present and future instead of the past (Nietzsche, 1874/2005, Boje 1995). These may just serve as examples of an amplitude of options; however, whichever form of reframe we are using, ultimately they result in a diversification of the organization of the original more narrow narrative. Thus, the diversification of the narrative in turn leads to its transformation.

Ambivalence and diversification has been a key concept in many areas of psychology; However, its implications for processes of meaning-making have been given little attention (Valsiner, 2002). Based on Valsiner's axioms (2002), Ribiero and Gonçalvez (2011) continue to fill that gap by examining further how that process of diversification evokes narrative change during therapy. The authors distinguish between a person's dominant self-narrative (i.e. his or her usual way of understanding and experiencing), and Innovative Moments (IM). IMs challenge a person's present framework of experiencing and thereby generate uncertainty. When this uncertainty increases and becomes overly threatening, a semiotic strategy to deal with this threat frequently emerges. The person either attenuates the possible novel meanings to quickly return to the dominant narrative or amplifies them. The amplification could either lead to a novel thought or yet again to a return to the dominant narrative. Ribiero and Gonçalvez (2011) show how the narrative transformation process evoked through IM's resemble a bifurcation process at which starting point resides in the intervention of the therapist or any other form of narrative intervention or life event. From a dialogical perspective, the dominant narrative and a non-dominant or innovative narrative expressed during IMs establish a cyclical relation and a mutual in-feeding (Valsiner, 2002) process which may block the self-development. However, an escalation of the innovative voice or voices can finally inhibit the dominant voice (Ribiero & Gonçalvez, 2011, p. 285) and thus help create new meaning which can ultimately lead to a transformation of the dominant narrative. Another way of transforming the dominant narrative opens up when the dominant and innovative voices start negotiating, and engage in joint action (Riebiero &

Gonçalves 2011, p. 298). The negotiating phase between the dominant and the novel narratives creates a new balance that ultimately, makes room for opposing voices which then have the chance to become so dominant that they replace the dominant narrative or at least allow for co-existence (Riebiero & Gonçalves, 2011, p. 299).

Riebiero & Gonçalves (2011), Valsiner, (2002, 2011), and Sato, et al. (2009) add a time dimension to these dynamics. Their shared axiom is that all meaning is created in the present. The meaning unfolds through integrating elements of past experience in relation to a future that can never be entirely determined at the present. Thereby meaning making and narrative changes can also be seen as a developmental model of how meaning emerges through the tensions between the present and the future (Valsiner, 2002). Valsiner (2002) proposes that in this very process three trajectories can be found. The first one is a lack of ambivalence which he calls the null condition. This lack of ambivalence leads to reaching a status quo and finally to decline. The second trajectory shows low to moderate ambivalence and leads to erratic movement of starting and stopping of the meaning making. This takes place through the production of signs which control meaning in the present without taking into consideration which path the meaning may take in the future. The third trajectory shows maximum ambivalence and leads to the emergence of strong signs which constrain the uncertainty of the future while the future is becoming present". Thus, also Valsiner (2002) postulates that it is the existence of maximum ambivalence or diversity of meaning that may ultimately be the catalyst in the process of driving change and transformation of narratives.

Conclusion

The study of organizational narratives enjoys more and more attention. The perspective so far is more on the variety of narratives that can be found throughout and across all sectors of an organization. The question has been more which narratives can be found and how they affect organizational life and well-being. My hypothesis starts from the reverse perspective: Based on the axiom that an organization can be understood in its multi-vocality (Boje, 1995) and that there

are ample examples of organizational narratives that form and reshape, I would argue that depending on the state of the organization, at one point meta-narratives of identity can freeze in their narrative structure and thus become stagnant, inflexible. Based on Valsiner's (2002), Watzlawick's (1978) Gonçalves and colleagues (2000, 2009, 2010, 2011) as well as Sato, et al's (2009) work the lack of ambivalence or diversity in narrative structure can dominate the groupthink, be a sign of ineffective and psychotic structures. I would hypothesize that the same can be the case for organizations as well. And much in the same way can the frozen narrative structure lead to organizational inertia and lack of energy, innovation and transformation. Thus it may not only be the content of the organizational narratives that influences the organization, understanding and perception of the collective organizational narrative, but its structures as well. If that should be the case, then the transformation of that frozen narrative structure could take place through narrative intervention that aim to diversify the meaning-making in whatever way, regardless of its content.

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