Narratives in and about organizations:
an anthropology, a mode of enquiry and a leadership tool

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Introduction

The notion of narrative does not only refer to novels, films and other works of fiction. Narrative refers to any way of representing a series of events as a sequence that moves from a point of beginning to a finishing point. These events can be real or imagined, and they can pertain to anything that the author has in mind, for example: nature, artefacts or human activities. There are an almost infinite diversity of narrative forms, including formal or mundane, oral or written, in dance or in paintings. Narratives can be produced, circulated and received in private or in public, individually or in group. And they can serve a wide range of purposes, from entertaining people to leading them into war, or getting them to work. Narratives crowd politics, news reporting and scientific theories, as well as sport commentaries, descriptions about how to get somewhere, and accounts of the day at the office. There is no grouping of people without a narrative activity and tradition. They are present in every age, in every place, and in every society.

Organizations are no exceptions. With their budgets, strategic plans, and annual reports but also gossips, project meetings, and wage discussions, organizations are pervaded with narratives. These narratives are essential to organizational life, and studying how organizational narratives are produced, circulated and received proves to be a fruitful way to investigate this field. This article presents an overview of the narratives in and about organizations. It is structured as follows. The first section introduces the idea that organizational members – both humans and non-humans – are *Homo Narrans* or storytelling beings. The second section describes the tenets of narrative enquiry in organizational settings. And the third section discusses the pros and cons of storytelling that is the systematic use of narratives to manage people.
Part 1: Narrative Anthropology: Organizational members as *Homo Narrans*

Narratives are essential to how humans create a sense of temporality for themselves (Paul Ricoeur, 1984). By ordering events chronologically, narratives provide this sense of time. Narratives can expend time. For example, a brief announcement of a Chief Executive Officer’s (CEO) dismissal can be rendered in such a richness of detail about the atmosphere and the attitudes of the people present that it takes a larger amount of clock-time to read this rendering than it took for the Chairman of the Board to read the announcement. Inversely, narratives can compress time, for example when an account states that “It took a few weeks for the Board to find another CEO”. Thanks to narratives, humans can actually relate to the mechanical clock-time, and create intelligibility in their lived times, that is time as they experience it in their lives.

The ability of narrative to make sense of time is closely connected to the ability of narrative to create a sense of causality. This later ability is conveyed by the notion of plot. Aristotle defines in the *Poetics* a plot as an arrangement of events into a whole with a beginning, a middle, and an end. More precisely, a plot expresses how one passes from one state of affairs to another, different state of affairs. By so doing, a plot provides a sense of progression, coherence and understandability. For example: “The disclosure that the CEO had told lies about having a PhD lead to his immediate dismissal by the Chairman of the Board. However, the historical role of the CEO in the past developments of the company and major disagreements among the shareholders about the future orientations of the corporation concurred to make it difficult to find someone to replace him. It took a few weeks for the Board to find another CEO”. A plot organizes one’s understanding of how, in the narrative, past conditions the present and influence the future. This is particularly true of masterplots: plots that because they have been told over and over, have acquired a moral force. For example, how the young David could defeat Goliath thanks to strategically directed efforts serve regularly as evidence that skill can prove to be superior to force.

By providing a sense of time and causality, narratives help people make sense of the negotiated order of organizational life. Organizing is akin to plotting (Barbara Czarniawska, 1997), and managers are the practical authors (Ann L. Cunliffe, 2001) of their experience of the life of their organizations. Narrative have proven to be of practical help to make sense of organizational events,
introduce change, and gain political advantage, (David M. Boje, 1991), but also identify hazards, define risk and ascribe blame (Jr Robert P. Gephart, 1993). Even the celebrated process of drafting corporate strategies proves to be an ad-hoc, conflictual and multi-voiced process of negotiating convincing narratives (David Barryand, Michael Elmes, 1997). Managers pay consequential efforts at selecting facts and ordering them into plots to produce a legitimate discourse that can orient their action (Mitchel Y. Abolafia, 2010). Alone or with others, managers draw on all of the heroic, tragic, romantic or ironic narrative styles to orient themselves and others in the ambiguous, changing and open-ended everyday of organizational life.

The reason is that humans are in their actions and practice essentially storytelling animals (Alasdair C. MacIntyre, 1981). Human communication rests on narration and humans are Homo Narrans who depend on narratives to produce and communicate their interpretations of the world (Walter R. Fisher, 1987). The capacity of humans to engage in collective actions does not only rest upon a logico-scientific mode of thoughts (Jerome S. Bruner, 1986), that is, a mode of thought that rests on an ideal of a formal (mathematical) system of description and explanation; relies on categorization or conceptualization that follow a formal logic of conjunction, disjunction, implication; and aims at providing explanations in terms of causes and consequences in a strive toward generalization. The capacity of humans to build and develop organizations rests as much on a narrative mode of thoughts (Jerome S. Bruner, 1986): a mode of thought that emphasizes the roles of good stories, gripping dramas, believable historical accounts; that intends to address the vicissitudes of human or human-like intentions and actions, and more generally human experience; that works through contextualisation; and that also emphasizes the singular.

Narratives are the building blocks of individual and organizational identity constructions. The history of a company posted on the company’s website is nothing but a selection of events that the current top management team wants the people inside and outside the organization to consider as characteristics of the company. Likewise, a job application emphasizes which past experiences and future expectations the applicant considers as most likely to be relevant. In both cases, it is a matter of building an identity through narration in the sense of defining the narrating subject with the help of a coherent and purposeful sequence of events of the past, present and future. Organizational gossip and un-told stories function in the same way: they select and emphasize.
“We have evolved from being a waste management company to being an energy company” or “I am a project manager with a proven focus on both people and results”: narratives help organizational members answer to the existential questions of who they are, why they work, who they can trust, and why they should say yes or no. Narratives are technologies of the self (Maria Tamboukou, 2008) that provide ways for organizational members to construct their sense of organizational and professional identity. Correspondingly, narratives help non-organizational members to elucidate which kind of people and/or organization they are dealing with, and thus make sense of their and other people’s identity as consumers. Narrative approaches to organizations illustrate the thesis that humans realise the meaning of their life through narration (Hannah Arendt, 1958). Narration is the characteristic feature of the human condition in that it makes it possible for humans to go beyond a mere biological expression of life (ζωή) and express a unique human ability not only to act, but also to give meaning to our actions by means of reflection and communication (bios).

By acknowledging the importance of narrative knowledge for interpretation, communication and action, organization studies plug into the vast cultural heritage of storytelling. In particular, a narrative approach to organizations makes it possible to “gain access to deeper organizational realities, closely linked to their members’ experiences” (Yiannis Gabriel, 2000, p2). An interest for organizational narratives make it possible for organization studies to (re-)connect to fundamental anthropological aspects of organizing that might otherwise remain ignored, such as the pervasiveness of fantasy in organizational settings, but also humour, derision, and complacency or contempt, conflicts and violence. Organization members keep telling narratives to communicate and keep consuming narratives to make sense of their world. It is thus important to develop methodological ways to track and analyse the production and circulation of narratives in organizations. This is the objective of organizational narrative enquiry.
Part 2: Narrative enquiry: ways of studying organizations

Narrative enquiry is in not a cohesive field. Ways to collect and analyse narratives are as diverse as narratives are numberless. Narrative enquiry stands for a broad spectrum of modes of fieldwork and reading methods, as illustrated in this section.

Organizational narratives are often transmitted orally, in small talks at coffee breaks or on the job to solve a task, including gossip, rumours and jokes (Julian Orr, E, 1996). Many of these narratives are not necessarily yet stabilised, realized, and articulated; they are prospective sense-making tools, a kind of narrative bet on the future, and Boje (2001, 2008) therefore calls them ante-narratives. Told and retold, ante-narratives can become organizational narratives and even corporate legends that act as weaker versions of antique myths (Yiannis Gabriel, 2000). An example of such a legend is the often recounted anecdote that Ingvar Kamprad, the billionaire founder and CEO of the Swedish furniture company IKEA, once stopped and chatted with two of his executives sitting in business class in the front part of a plane while he himself was on his way toward the rear part of the plane and sit in economy class. This narrative perfectly illustrates IKEA’s corporate policy of cost saving in every detail of organizational practice and Kamprad’s image of an ordinary, even borderline stingy, self-made man. However, many organizational narratives are also put in print, like the CEO’s letter to the shareholders, advertising, or job announcements. One can even collect written narratives by providing an arbitrary start point and, with surprisingly good results, ask managers to fill in with a narrative (Monika Kostera, 2005).

Collecting written narratives is potentially less challenging, methodologically speaking, than collecting oral narratives as the later needs often to be elicited. Interviews and shadowing are efficient ways to collect narratives since many respondents provide accounts that are spontaneously formed into narrative. One can also prompt narratives asking “can you recall when you first started to talk about the necessity of reorganizing your department? And what happened next?” (Barbara Czarniawska, 2004, p.51). Finally, working from the interview transcript, a narrative can be constructed out of what the respondents have said.

The rationale of organizational narrative enquiry is to consider that narration underlies organizing (Barbara Czarniawska, 1997), then look for narratives – for example stories about reforms and change, life and identity, or failures and drama – and, finally, read the material that has been collected as
narratives. Classical narratology (Luc Hermanand, Bart Vervaeck, 2005; Gerald Prince, 1982) offers a conceptual framework to analyse the formal characteristics of a narrative. Questions that narratology asks are: who is the story told by (narrator)? To whom is the story told (narratee)? Is the author the same as the narrator or is the story told from a point of view different from that of the author? What is the plot of the narrative? How is time rendered in this plot, and how does this affect the readability of the plot? How are the characters and the settings represented? Classic narratology, which is strongly influenced by structuralism, tends to isolate the text from its social context. It focuses on the text’s formal aspects and this can be seen as a limiting trait to its use. Postmodern narratology tries to release narratology from this limitation, coupling for example narratology to feminist studies to open new possibilities for organizations studies.

In contradistinction to techniques focussed on the formal aspects of narratives, other narrative enquiry techniques provide ways to study narratives in their organizational context in order to understand this context. Boje (2001) lists eight such techniques. 1: Deconstruction unfolds the ideological assumptions that underlie a narrative, for example which voices it privileges or silences. 2: Grand narrative analysis relates the narrative at hand to the metanarratives that characterise a specific society at one time in history, for example the metanarrative of progress in modernity or that of incredulity in post-modernity. 3: Microstoria analysis looks at the other end of the macro-micro continuum and investigates how a narrative refers to knowledge and events that are very specific to a given time and given place. Microstoria often privileges narratives produced by little who are not at the top of social hierarchies”. 4: Story network analysis aims at mapping, for example through network diagrams, how a narrative relates to other narratives and how these relations follow or differ from the contact patterns among people or among organizations, and, more generally, the social networks within which organizational actors evolve. 5. Intertextuality analysis shares with story network analysis an interest for how narratives relate one to the other, but focuses on how a narrative borrows or distances itself from other narratives, for example through loans or quotations. 6. Causality analysis focuses on the kind of causes that are invoked to put together fragments that constitute the narrative, for example physical, psychological or successionist causality. 7: Likewise focussed on causality, plot analysis investigates how a narrative unfolds the arrangement of events in the text and relates this to the four master forms of emplotments: romance, satire, comedy and tragedy. 8: Finally, theme analysis unfolds how stories
participate to make sense out of the chaotic everyday of organizational life by bringing events into known themes, for example bureaucracy. Together, these ways of reading a narrative provide an understanding for how narrative function in the social settings where they are produced, diffused and received.

On all these accounts, narrative enquiry offers rich opportunities to analyse organizational culture. Methods inspired by narratology or other methods of narrative enquiry provide a practical means to critically examine taken-for-granted assumptions, analyse how organizational members and non-members perceive and use organizational rituals and symbols, unfold the rationales of practices that are specific to the organization and, more generally, study the state and process of re-enactment of “the learned outcome of a group’s solving its problems of external survival and internal integration”, as Schein (In preparation) defines organizational culture.

Organizational scholars with an interest for narrative have also shown the relevance of works of fiction for management practice, management studies and management education. A key rationale behind the use of works of fiction for the study, teaching and practice of management is to get closer to the subjective experience of organizational membership (Nelson Phillips, 1995). Managers are invited to read good novels – or watch good films – to become better managers (Barbara Czarniawskaand, Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, 1994) following the argument that works of fiction provide rich case studies that transmit tacit knowledge and represent the complex dynamics of organizational life without simplifying it. For example, the classic play Antigone offers an opportunity to get public administrators into a discussion of the ethical dimensions of law enforcement (Frank Marini, 1992), or the selling success of The goal (Eliyahu M. Goldratt, Jeff Coxand, David Whitford, 2004) which is a management accounting textbook designed as a novel in the classic master-teaches-pupil genre, the former being a consultant and the latter a manager, proves that fiction is an appreciated way to learn management techniques. The fact that so many people put up Dilbert (e.g., Scott Adams, 1997) comic strips on their office door or boards indicate the relevance of humorous narratives to convene, and possibly help support, the absurdities of office life. Moreover, attention to novels, films, TV-series and other narrative expressions of popular culture provides an opportunity for managers and management scholars to reflect on how management is perceived by the public at large.
Part 3: Narrative leadership: Storytelling in organizations

The potential of using narrative for practical managerial purposes has not gone unnoticed to management consultants and other helpers of managers. In a few years, storytelling has established itself as a standard managerial tool. Amstrong (1992) is one of the earliest advocates of storytelling as a managerial tool. He lists the advantages of managing by “storying around”: simple - you have done it since childhood; timeless - old stories will prove as effective as new ones; demographic-proof – everybody likes to listen to stories; also an excellent way to pass along traditions, an efficient form of training and a wonderful form of recognition; even a great way to spread the word, a great recruiting and hiring tool, a great sale tool and memorable. In short, storytelling is for him an effective way to make you a better manager.

There seems to be a story, type of story, or way of telling stories for every managerial situation, purpose and style. Fables are praised for coming with a moral, sagas with a hero, and detective stories with clarification. Storytelling is featured as a privileged way to communicate, inspire, mediate knowledge, build trust, support people, overcome problems, and bring along change – in two words: leadership in practice. Storytelling is also invoked to turn the history of a company or a product in a good story that conveys an identity, a sense of time and place and values, and that is easy to remember. This story can be an embellishment of the past, such as when leaders at the Walt Disney Corporation invoke systematically the genius (or genie?) of Walter Disney (David M. Boje, 1995). But the story can also be faked, like when two Swedish restaurant designers invent Joe Farelli, a successful restaurant owner from Little Italy in New York City, to establish the credibility of an eponym mafia-films pitched restaurant in Gothenburg. “Let me tell you a story…” is featured as an all-round managerial tool.

This tool is not innocuous, though. Storytelling is also bewitching the human mind (Christian Salmon, 2010). Management has hijacked the age-long art of telling stories for mercantile and power purposes. Storytelling has become an efficient tool to establish corporate hegemony. It creates a dream society that facilitates an uncritical praise of brands and increases corporate control on mental representations and world-views. Stories format brains and thoughts as much as they inform. The steady repetition of success stories establishes as standards performance levels that are basically unrealistic, thereby creating a permanent sense of shortcomings and failure among the workforce. The depiction of actual persons as larger-than-life characters creates unrealistic patterns of explanation and expectations. A clever plotting
has the ability to conceal logical contradictions and lock people in contradictory binds able to de-structure groups and work collectives, and even cause individuals to commit suicide. Puns and derisive stories are able to turn oppositions but even injustice and suffering into mockery. Streamlined histories have the potential to reduce the diversity of lived experience of the past to a linear progression that legitimates the dominant view of the present; they can also establish unfair patterns of rewards and punishments. A seemingly obvious morale can conceal the complexity of a moral situation and simplify the ethical consequences at stake. Classic works are appropriated and the cultural heritage is commodified for any immediate purpose at hand, for example profit. It is hard to criticize a narrative since a key trait of narratives is to deflect questioning, bracket criticism and neutralise critique. Another key trait is to advance lies, des-information and propaganda. In sum, storytelling has the power to create a fictive work environment and use this fiction to run real working places in the interest of the storyteller. On this account, the crash of a company such as Enron, the sub-prime engendered economic crisis of 2008, or the recent fall of Facebook on the stock market show that storytelling can even engender a fictive economy that generates real losses.
Conclusion

The growing returns of narrative anthropology, enquiry, and politics have prompted a vivid interest among organizational practitioners, scholars and students for narratives from, in, about, around, and for organizations. This interest has allowed major advances, for example in understanding how organizational members use links of causality when they provide accounts, the role of temporality in organizing, and, more generally, the richness of experiences of organizational members. Novels, film, and other narrative forms have a proven pedagogical record. And storytelling has grown into a managerial tool aimed at creating a sense of organizational history, developing the cohesiveness of organization culture, or supporting organizational change.

However, this success raises a corresponding need to develop a critical awareness about narratives in organizations. The point of such a critical awareness is not to reject a narrative mode of thinking, enquiring and leading, and revert to a mode of understanding organization that would exclusively rest on what Bruner (1986) calls a logico-scientific mode of thought. The narrative mode of thought offers unique epistemological and practical entries into the reality of organizational life and it would be a real analytical loss to ignore the benefits that it can bring along. But the use of narratives as a mode of enquiry, a way to present organizational research, or a management tool should be accompanied by a good dose of critical awareness. There are limits to the capacity of narrative to represent things (Catherine Kohler Riessman, 1993). A critical sense is needed to explore these limits, and, for example, identify the political agenda, values and priorities, and world-view that any narrative carries along. Narratives can be so seducing that it is difficult to question how they connect the past, present and future, and what they claim about how people and things get along. Critical awareness is what is needed to resist the power of seduction of narratives.
References


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