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# “PLAYING BACK-SPIN BALLS”: NARRATING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN CONSTRUCTION

**ABSTRACT:** What does change mean for organisational members? Although researchers have attempted to capture its intrinsic complexities, there remains uncertainty as to what change really is and how it happens. Drawing on a longitudinal interpretative case study of change in a large Swedish construction company, a narrative approach is used to elicit middle managers’ stories of change episodes over the past two decades. These stories have then been compared with the narratives of the same episodes in governing documents. We found that the lived and the formal narratives, respectively, depicted two very different interpretations and enactments of change: the former described a discontinuous process of discrete contingencies demanding immediate short-term responses whereas the later described a proactive incremental strategic plan. A narrative approach to the study of organizational change contributes to deeper insights into the ramifications of an organization’s socio-cultural system by enabling the capture of significant variations, contradictions and tensions, both for organizational members and for the researchers who study change.

**Keywords:** Narrative analysis, organizational change, middle-managers, Sweden

## INTRODUCTION

Change and (re)organisation are fascinating and elusive aspirations constantly sought yet seldom fully achieved. This is maybe not so strange: change is a given (e.g. Stoltz, 2004), “change is the only constant” (Asimov, 1920-1992) – and for organizations, the ability to change is a decisive factor for survival (e.g. Teece et al. 1997). The conditions seem to be obvious: change or die! But, what is meant by change, and how does change happen? How is it interpreted, and how is it enacted?

Researchers have attempted to capture the intrinsic complexities, uncertainties and contradictions embedded in organizational change while disagreeing on the meaning of “organisational change” and consequently on the ways in which to study change (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005). In a seminal paper, Tsoukas and Chia (2002: 570) draw on Orlikowski (1996), Weick (1998) and Feldman (2000) and call for a re-

orientation of research on organisational change towards a process-oriented and micro-level approach. They argue for a “reversal of ontological priority” of the constructs *organisation* and *change*. Rather than change being viewed as a property of an entity – an organisation – the organisation needs to be viewed as an emergent state of continuous organisational change, which Tsoukas and Chia (2002: 570) refer to as “organisational becoming.”

*[C]hange is the reweaving of actors' webs of beliefs and habits of action as a result of new experiences obtained through interactions. Insofar as this is an ongoing process, that is, to the extent actors try to make sense of and act coherently in the world, change is inherent in human action. Organizations is an attempt to order the intrinsic flux of human action, to channel it toward certain ends, to give particular shape, through generalizing and institutionalizing particular meanings and rules. (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002: 570)*

How then would such a sensemaking and ordering process look at the macro and micro levels? A method for studying change processes and practices as they are perceived and enacted at the micro level is examining organisational discourse/s. This “linguistic turn” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000) has resulted in an increasing number of interpretative studies of organisational and managerial discourse practices and their implications and effects on organisational change (e.g. Barrett et al., 1995, Ford, 1999; Heracleous and Barret, 2001; Heracleous 2002; Räsänen and Linde, (2004). To fully understand how change happens in organisations, scholars need to engage with change as a discursive construction constituted through texts: spoken, written and visual representations. A discourse-analytical approach to the study of change, according to Grant et al. (2005: 8-10) may enable a fuller understanding of organisational change

as a socially constructed reality, as negotiated meaning and as an intertextual phenomenon.

Discourse studies of organisational change have also contributed new insights into change-related phenomena such as organisational culture (e.g. Beech 2000), new technology (Heracleous and Barrett, 2001), HRM (Ness K, 2010) among others. Since discourse studies are informed by a variety of research fields, narratology, linguistics, anthropology, sociology and socio-psychology, it is inherently multi-disciplinary, offering a wide range of different approaches as well as opening up for interdisciplinary collaborations. In spite of a growing change literature focusing on discourses and discursive practices in organisation and management studies, this interest has scarcely been manifested in the construction management literature.

The overall purpose of this paper is therefore to contribute to an initial filling of this gap by using a discursive approach, namely narrative analysis, to understand how a 20-year change trajectory (1990-2011) has been made sense of and represented at two levels of a large construction company. The questions we address are: 1. How has change during this period been represented in the organisation's official documents? 2. How do organisational actors (here middle managers) interpret and enact the change trajectory? Applying a narrative approach enabled the creation of two very different narratives of change, which then led us to pose question 3. How can a comparison of formal and lived versions of change inform theories of change in construction? The main contribution of this paper is twofold: to show how narrative analysis may be used to link macro level to micro level phenomena, and to offer a deeper understanding of the difficulties involved in creating strategic coherence.

## **THEORY: A NARRATIVE APPROACH**

One way of learning in an organization is through exchanging stories stored in employees' memories. Through these communal exchanges employees can make sense of situations and of the organisation (Weick 1996). They learn the language games of the actors and the tacit norms and cultural rules that apply (Wittgenstein 1989). Through storytelling they share each others' previous experiences and insights, which they can then use as reference points to make judgements in like critical situations (Räsänen and Gunnarson, 2007). From a research point of view, stories are a powerful means of gaining insight into the lived experiences of employees and managers: how they position themselves and how they accommodate their identities to the various situations they encounter and negotiate (e.g. Boyce 1996, Gabriel 2000, James & Minnis 2004, Weick 1996).

Boje (1998) coined the phrase "storytelling organizations," arguing that the stories told in the workplace implicate all aspects of the workplace, reflecting and invoking moral judgement, attitudes and emotions. The epistemological underpinning of a narrative approach is that narratives are constitutive of organisations and organising (Boje, 1998; Gabriel, 2000) and have the power to shape the nature and sequence of events that they describe (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007, 671). In organizations, storytelling is often fragmented and circular, takes place in a collective and can be distributed in space and in time.

That a narrative approach has been found to inform change research is not so strange. Both rest on the notion of temporality and are preoccupied with sequences of events unified by plots in which multiple agents interact (Barry and Elmes, 1997; Humphreys and Brown, 2008). Organizational change has been described as shifting conversations (Ford, 1999), as narrative structures that generate and shape the direction of change

(Browning, 1991), and as being obstructed by a dominant narrative that subverts change (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009).

Corren (1999) argued that narratives have structuring and organising properties, that their syntagmatic structure precedes organizational structure. Geiger and Antonacopoulou (2009) discussed how a grand or dominant narrative can create an organizational self-reinforcing mechanism and a blind spot that may generate organisational inertia. The dominant narrative is the one that articulates a story that predicts the nature and direction of future actions leading to change, what and how to change, with what consequences, in competition with other proposals in circulations (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007, pp.682). Brown (2006) viewed the identities of organizations as constituted by the totality of collective identity-relevant narratives authored by participant constructed and re-constructed as regimes of truth. There seems to be a recycling of narratives told in an organization, which according to Boje (2001) carry traces of a symbolic or iconic historically rooted narrative that tends to remain fairly stable over a period of time.

While organizational change can be explained retrospectively *using* narratives, change can also be influenced *through* narrative (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007, Veenwijk and Berendse, 2008). This duality, Weick (1995) explains, occurs because organizational actors are biased by their own retrospective conceptualisations of past events and their reinterpretations of past decisions to guide them in their current decision-making rather than relying on “objective” accounts of past events. Boje (1991b) showed how narratives were used as both a means of hindering an organization from repeating historically bad choices, but also as a means of encouraging the repetition of past success. Understanding an organization’s narratives can provide valuable clues about the direction and progress of that organization’s change process (Browning, 1991).

Stories, Boje maintained (1991a:8), are: “the blood vessels through which changes pulsate in the heart of organizational life”

Weick and Quinn (1999) argued that the meanings of organizational change lie foremost in the cognition of the observers. If an observer views change from a macro perspective, he/she will tend to see it as discontinuous episodes while from a micro perspective, change will tend to be seen as part of a continuous process. Pettigrew (1987), however, claimed that the converse applies; perceiving change from a macro perspective would tend to construct continuities rather than discontinuities.

It has also been argued that organizational change is “multi-authored”, constructed through several competing accounts that exist in parallel and sometimes become entangled (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007). One of these narratives, however, seems to maintain dominance over others and may jeopardize the legitimacy of competing accounts. Geiger and Antonacopoulou (2009) described how a dominant narrative evolved in an organization, how contesting narratives were discounted, and how the dominant narrative produced a self-reinforcing mechanism that acted as a centrifugal force of change in the organization.

To capture the meaning making of ongoing change in an organisation, Lynn (1990) advocates the use of a narrative approach. Her underlying assumption is that the interpretations of the stories of those “within” i.e. living the change embody the change. Like Boje (1991a) and Weick (1995) she argues that organizational members create and enact the realities that they inhabit, upon which they then predict or plan future actions; therefore, retrospective interpretations are not simply alive in the present moment, but they enact their ways into the future. Through shared stories, a common frame of reference is created within a collective, which comes to represent the dominant logic of that collective (Lynn, 1990). This collective logic may be

viewed as the dominant “reality” of the collective and would take precedent over presented realities (Lynn, 1990).

### **BRIEF CASE DESCRIPTION: OUR NARRATIVE**

The findings draw on an ongoing longitudinal case study at one of the largest construction companies in Sweden, here referred to as Alpha. The focus of the research is strategising and organizational change from 1990 to date (combining retrospective accounts and “real-time” accounts). This period has been one of the most turbulent periods so far in its approximately 100-year history. In 1990, Alpha was organized in geographical units, which operated independently of each with few, if any, common strategic guidelines. Alpha was characterized by opportunistic endeavours: the different geographical units took on all kinds of projects (both in Sweden and abroad) as long as they were considered to be profitable. The corporate board invested in the stock markets as well as in several company acquisitions unrelated to construction.

At the beginning of 2000 things started to change. The corporate board decided that Alpha needed to increase its efficiency, strive toward standardization and specialization. The board sold a large part of their stock-holdings and unrelated proprietorship, and formulated a strategic direction common for the whole organization. The strategy was divided into two main tracks: the first was to “increase the performance in the current organization” and the second was to “develop significantly more efficient building projects”. Thus, Alpha wanted to coordinate and make use of all the intrinsic knowledge that already existed within the company and to capitalize on their scale and experience in running building projects. With this



initiative, Alpha intended to become a more efficient construction company and a “model for Swedish construction”.

This strategic direction remained more or less the same throughout the 2000s while top management decided on a number of organizational changes and motivated them in relation to their overall vision of a more efficient construction company. In 2003, Alpha reorganised, removing a whole hierarchal level, creating a more centralised organisation. It started advocating the use of balance-scorecard tools to measure performance in the different geographical units; a common code of conduct was formulated, and a central purchase organization was created. In 2009, the HR, finance and organizational support functions, were moved from the geographical units to sort directly under top-management. The main focus during 2000 was on efficiency and in and financial profitability. In the beginning of the 2010s, Alpha formulated a new strategic direction.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

A case study design was chosen since the aim was to increase understanding of the unfolding of complex phenomena as perceived and narrated at the micro level (Eisenhardt 1989, Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). The data on which this paper is based consists of retrospective accounts of change, to which a narrative analysis was applied. In-depth open-ended retrospective interviews with 27 upper-middle managers were carried out during 2010 and 2011. Managers at middle levels were chosen since they often possess interpretative priority over other employees and therefore have precedence in framing collective meaning in an organization (Lynn, 1990). Since we wanted as diverse a population of middle managers as possible, participants were selected from different geographical locations and varying organizational functions (from the line organization, from the central functions, from different product units).

Within these constraints the selection was partly arbitrary, through snowballing, subject to availability and other practical considerations. There were no preconceptions or theoretical framework on organizational change guiding the researchers; rather the point of departure was the perspectives that emerged through the stories in the interviews. Such an approach, “free” storytelling without any prior reflection or preparation, has been advocated as an appropriate narrative interview technique. Rather than prompting interviewees to talk about discrete episodes or specific events, the personal stories that evolved were allowed to build on larger frames of references and examining the underlying assumptions and beliefs that guide actions (Cladinin and Conelley, 2000; Gill, 2001).

The first part of the interview consisted of a brief orientation of the participant’s background. During the interviews, lasting between 1-2 hours, the respondents were asked to talk about their experiences of major changes over the last two decades. As it turned out, the majority of the managers had personal “lived” experiences of the given period.

The only consistent “involvement” from the researcher conducting the interviews was to ask for the perceived rationale in relation to the events described: “Why did [this event] happen?” and “What do you think were the driving forces behind [this event]?”. Interviews were conducted until no (or little) new information was provided from further interviews, i.e. the same events were mentioned and the perceptions and rationales overlapped. As an “aide-mémoire” the interviewees were given an A3 sheet

of paper to help them with their thinking. The figure below (Fig. 1) is a conceptual illustration of a typical account.

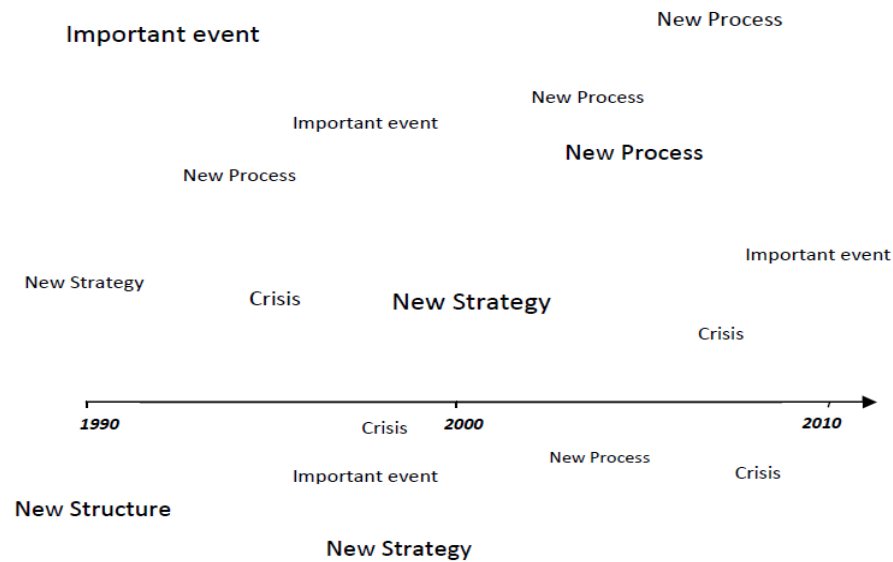


Figure 1. Example of interviewee conception of change events.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. A narrative analysis was then applied on the data, which means that the various accounts or fragments of accounts of change were coded and plots linking the sequence fragments were identified (Czarniawska, 2004). The analysis was conducted by two researchers resulting in fairly similar interpretations. The differences were then resolved through common engagement with the data and dialogue.

The analysis followed three main steps. The first step was to compile the accounts into chronological sequences unified by plots to obtain a chronology and overview of the time perspective. It turned out, however, that the retrospective accounts were not associated with years nor really with events, but typically to certain persons (mostly CEOs). The most common conceptual accounts in relation to chronology were: “I

remembered that [this event] happened when Mr. Z had just become CEO” ....or...”

That [event] was just after Mr.Y resigned as a CEO” ...or... “[This] was during Mr.X’s time” (see Löwstedt et al 2011).

The second step of the analysis was to understand the interviewees perceptions of the changes. The main concern here was that the data would “speak to us”. From our close readings of the transcripts, a pattern gradually emerged. This resulted in the identification of seven organizational episodes that were remarkably similar in the 27 interviews. The high degree of consistency found in relation to these seven episodes, seemed to suggest that the interviewees were drawing from a common organisational memory.

The third step was to analyse business plans, official pamphlets, CEO statements and annual reports covering the same seven episodes. The lived narratives and the formal documents were aggregated into one typical change narrative, respectively. We then compared these two versions.

## **ONE CHANGE TRAJECTORY- TWO NARRATIVES**

An interpretative analysis of interviewee accounts revealed that all of them identified seven change episodes between 1990 and 2011. The representations of these seven episodes were then selected from governing texts such as annual reports, strategy documents and business plans. The narrative analysis of the episodes resulted in the construction of two representative narratives of change: one for each data set. In the following the two versions are presented in the order of their unfolding, which is not necessarily the order in which the episodes were narrated in the lived accounts. The quotes in the formal version are from business plans, official memos and annual

reports. The lived version is a conflation of the interviewee's accounts of the change episodes.

### ***The formal version***

#### **1991 - 4XX (process)**

*With operation 4XX, Alpha as the first construction company has embarked on a thorough change process. It will increase the operational efficiency as well as add value to our customers (Annual statement 1991)*

#### **1995 – OWOW (Official description Alpha's articulated work process)**

*OWOW regards both the final goal and the way we reach it [...] We have seen how things should be done and how they shouldn't be done. Our ideas have been tested in practice. By "Our Ways of Work" we use all the ideas that have proven to be successful. We can therefore increase the performance for our customers and become more efficient. All the time. ("OWOW" official pamphlet)*

#### **2000 - ISO 14001 certification (process)**

*Alpha is the first international construction company that has implemented the certificated standardized environmental process, ISO14001, in the whole corporation – from corporate office down to every affiliation. This standardized process is an essential fundament for structured and efficient environmental work. One of the challenges for this process in the future will be to appropriate it so that every project's environmental performance can be reached, but preferably also to exceed the customers' expectations. (Annual Statement 2000\*)*

NOTE\*: This certification was announced already in the 1997's annual statement "all operation will be ISO 14001 certificated before 31 December, 2000"

#### **2001 - The first common business plan is formulated (strategy)**

The first common business plan for Alpha Sweden is written. The strategic bullet points are formulated as:

*Long-term success factors for Alpha Sweden (Business Plan, 2001-2004)*

And one of them is:

*To increase the degree of cooperation within Alpha Sweden (Business Plan, 2001-2004)*

#### **2003 - A new business plan is formulated (strategy)**

This business plan is divided into two main statements.

*The strategy, in order to reach [a formulated goal for 2006], is to increase the performance within our current operations and to develop a more efficient building process. (Business Plan, 2004-2006)*

#### **2003 - Security (process)**

Preventing accidents at the constructions sites are introduced as a main focus area.

*We strive to achieve our goal of zero accidents at the construction sites. (Annual Report 2005\*)*

NOTE\*: Later also included as a main focus area in the business plan 2008-2010

#### **2009 - "Alpha United" (organizational structure)**

Alpha withdraws support functions from the regions and gathers them instead into a centralized unit.

*Alpha Sweden's common support functions provide specialist competence to the organization. Through specialization and common ways of work these contribute so that the existing knowledge within Alpha Sweden is handled and used in the best ways possible. Alpha Sweden's support functions are mainly divided into three areas: Economy, HR, and Operations Support (Business Plan, Alpha Sweden, 2008-2010)*

### ***The lived version***

Every manager didn't highlight all of these events, but they were the most frequent overall. There existed a high degree of conformity regarding how the circumstances related to the events were described. The few contradictions that were found are presented.

#### **1991 - 4XX (process)**

This change was consistently interpreted as a direct reaction to the economic crisis in the beginning of the 1990's.

*4XX was something that was initiated due to the economic crisis...we had to do something [...] This crisis [early 90's] was a hundred...no a thousand times worse than this recent crisis [late 2000's] (Upper-Level Manager)*

#### **1995 - OWOW (process)**

The most frequent opinions regarding OWOW were that it was developed by a few devoted individuals, mainly from a certain geographical division. Nestling further in the rationale behind this change resulted in two different interpretations. One was that ISO 9001 had become an important standard in other industries and that Alpha's customers started to pressure Alpha to implement it as well. But Alpha's managers considered ISO 9001 to be "too much paper work" and a bit "too boring" and instead a group of individuals (mainly Higher-Level Managers from Geography A) decided that Alpha "should develop their own ISO 9001 instead" (their own standardized process) and this resulted in OWOW. Two Upper-Level Managers did however instead interpret the prior work with 4XX (the first episode in the chronology) to be the main driver, as it had created an insight of the advantage of using standardized processes in the organization.

#### **2000 - ISO 14001 certification (process)**

This certification was exclusively interpreted as a direct reaction to the "Enviv Disaster\*" crisis (in 1997). One manager expanded the argument and said that they probably would have certified Alpha anyway, but definitely not that early.

*It was pretty easy to talk about environmental issues at Alpha after that crisis, but it was pretty hard before. (Upper-Level Manager)*

Alpha needed to neutralize the effects of this crisis and take action (this event was reported intensely in the media and was also discussed at the highest governmental level and Alpha's stock value decreased with 30 percent during this period). An Upper-Level Manager described the period: "Alpha was that times BP (British Petroleum)\*\*,"

NOTE\*: The "Enviv Disaster" was a large construction project that went wrong, resulting in major environmental damages, for which Alpha was held responsible.

NOTE\*\*: In 2010 BP was responsible for the biggest ocean oil spill in US history

#### **2001 - The first common business plan is formulated (strategy)**

This can be found in the documentation as “Business Plan Alpha Sweden” and it was formulated for the years 2001-2004. However, none of the interviewed managers highlighted this business plan themselves; it was only commented on when the interviewer asked about it. The reason for this was that the managers didn’t interpret this business plan to have any effects. One of the managers gave us a rather informative answer for why no one had bothered to highlight this plan.

*Yeah...but that is [The business plan 2001-2004] probably the least grounded business plan in the worlds history...Mr.X [CEO at the time] went into a room for two hours and then he came out with a business plan ...I mean it wasn't grounded at all. (Upper-Level Manager)*

Instead, they all agreed that the very first business plan for Alpha Sweden was formulated two years later, in 2003 (the next chronological episode)

*2003 was the first time that Alpha Sweden started to work with strategy (Upper-Level Manager)*

### **2003 - A new business plan is formulated (strategy)**

As already stated above, the managers didn’t interpret this as *new* business plan, but rather as *the first* business plan for Alpha Sweden.

There existed different interpretations of the drivers behind this business plan, but the majority of them considered it as something “that the new CEO did” (Alpha Sweden appointed a new CEO just before this business plan was formulated). The overall rationale was hence merely related to a person\* .

*This work with [the 2003 business plan] was Mr.W's [the new CEO] baby. (Upper-Level Manager)*

A less common interpretation of this business plan was that it was a reaction to financial losses that Alpha Sweden had suffered from during a precedent period of time. The corporate board had therefore decided that something had to be done and this new business plan was a part of the actions taken.

NOTE\*: See Löwstedt et al (2011), for an elaboration on “personified strategies”

### **2003 - Security (process)**

Same type of person related rationale as the example above “He thought...”He did”. But this change was related to a different person, namely the new CEO for Alpha International that also was appointed in 2003.

*Yeah, security...that was his thing [that CEO]...no one can take that away from him (Upper-Level Manager)*

### **2009 - "Alpha United" (organizational structure)**

We found two different main interpretations of this change. One group of managers related Alpha United to the business plan formulated in 2003. But the majority interpreted it as a reaction to the downswing in the world economy [the financial crisis, in 2008], as a way to cut costs. The stories furthermore indicated that this was a controversial change and its effects were frequently commented. We were told that some districts have embraced the change, while others haven’t. One manager described it as:

*Yeah, actually people keep doing it the same way as before...even though they have been told to use the central functions (Lower-Level Manager)*

Table 1 below summarizes the differences between the two versions.

Episode of Change	Formal Narrative	Lived Narrative
4XX (1991)	"To increase operational efficiency"	Reaction to the global economic crisis
OWOW (1995)	"To increase performance for the customers and to become more efficient"	Championing by a few individuals / An alternative to ISO 9000, expected by customers / Awareness of the benefits from common ways of work
ISO14001 (2000)	"For structured and efficient environmental processes"	Reaction to the environmental disaster
1st Business Plan (2001)	"Long term success factors"	No mention
New Business Plan (2003)	"To increase performance and to develop a more efficient building process"	Related to the CEO that introduced it.
Security (2003)	"To achieve the goal of zero accidental events"	Related to the CEO that introduced it.
Alpha United (2009)	"To provide specialist competence to the organization and to make sure the knowledge is used in the best way possible"	Reaction to the global financial crisis

### ***The Overall Change trajectory***

The episodes represent seven different changes, but their aggregation also represents an overall change over time. When comparing the rationales behind the episodes in the two versions, one could see a clear difference in the overall mode and characteristics of organizational change over time.

### **The Formal Narrative**

In the formal narrative change appears to be continuous over time, consistent to a common trend. All the episodic events relate to increased standardization and centralization. This includes standardized ways of work and processes: 4XX, VSAA, ISO14001, Security, and the two business plans that also relates to increased standardization. A common rationale can be identified: increased efficiency through standardization and centralization.



## **The Lived Narrative**

In the lived narrative, on the other hand, change appears to be discontinuous over time, the different episodes do not relate to any common trend. They are rather perceived as reactive actions, mainly unrelated to each other. The common rationale for change over time in the lived version is that every episodial change was either a reaction to an immediate circumstance or a personified action. This was also confirmed when the managers reflected on the overall change in their organization. The majority of them emphasized reactive abilities and the importance of individuals as the main drivers for organizational change.

## **DISCUSSION**

Using a narrative lens to study various aspects of organizations can provide better insights into the ramifications of an organisation's socio-cultural system and enable the capture of significant variations, contradictions and tensions, both for its members and for the researchers who study it. A narrative perspective can increase understanding of how the macro and the micro levels are linked; how the topics of organizational narratives evoke wider cultural and historical contexts (Barry and Elmes, 1997).

Many researchers within the field of organizational narrative have highlighted the similarities between storytelling and change research, pointing out that both are attempting to understand complex interactions and interdependencies between people, events and contexts over time (e.g. Barry and Elmes, 1997; Brown et al 2009). However, much of the change literature, generally as well as in the field of construction, consists of monologic narratives of change, mediated by an "objective"

researcher, who has made an à priori assumption as to what narratives count. In these accounts of change, certain narratives are privileged while others, the dissenting or silent voices often remain invisible (e.g. Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Buchanan and Dawson, 2007). The contribution of this paper is to show that a reflexive narrative approach to the study of change processes in construction can provide a more nuanced, and democratic account of how change is represented, interpreted and enacted at different organizational levels.

The aim of this paper has been to use a narrative lens to explore stories of change in a large construction company in Sweden. Our ontological grounding is in a discourse perspective on organization, where objectivity or “truth” is impossible to achieve; rather, there are multiple truths, i.e. narratives, competing for articulation and legitimacy (e.g. Czarniawska, 1998; Grant et al, 2004; Buchanan and Dawson). Here we chose change-narrative strains covering a 20-year period at two levels of the organization: narratives of change in formal documents authored predominantly at top-management level by the CEO and executive staff. These governing texts: corporate strategies, business plans, annual reports and CEO statements have been labelled: *formal narratives*. The second set of narratives were collected at middle-management level through in-depth interviews in which respondents were asked to describe the most important change events over the period. These narratives have been labelled: *lived narratives*.

The reasons for this particular choice of narratives were partly serendipitous and partly governed by qualitative research logics. To acquire knowledge of an organisation, important primary sources, usually explored iteratively, are the organisation’s governing documents and the organisational actors’ beliefs, views and opinions. From a discourse and narrative perspective, Shotter and Cunliffe (2003: 18)

argue that managers “create meaning in relationally responsive ways” and are thereby able to give shape and direction to ensuing action. Managers serve as interpreters of events which they mediate to employees in the form of cognitive frames or scripts (e.g. Weick 1995) thus wielding influence over the interpretations of other. Since middle managers are sandwiched between top and bottom. In the iterative close readings of governing documents and interview transcript, we found remarkable similarities between the content and linguistic realisation among all the governing text types on the one hand, and among the middle managers’ narratives on the other. However, there was a large discrepancies between the governing narratives and the lived versions. Two very different stories materialised in the representative aggregated text that we then constructed of each version.

The formal narratives in terms of rhetorical realisation remain consistent over the 20-years, e.g. the organisation is represented as unique (“*the first to*”) collective (“*we*”) with goals assumed to be common. The language is characterised by a mix of hortatory (imperatives) and superlative language. It presents a causally coherent and incremental progression of change over the past 20 years. Looking at this version from a narrative perspective, we see that it depicts an idealised view of the organisation which merges past, present and future. This narrative reflects the organisations beliefs, norms and values (see excerpts in result section) and mediates a vision of a future reality founded on a coherent past and present. It constructs an “as if reality” that is meant to reduce uncertainty and ambiguity (Rhodes and Brown, 2005:173) by using a future perfect strategy (Pitsis et al, 2003, Schütz, 1967) through which actions and states in the future are presented as practically achieved. This strategy cognitively creates a sense of causal links and predetermination intended to depict the organisation as proactive. The function of the formal version is promotional and

performs identification both internally and externally: internally in that it positions employees as equal partners in the co-construction of the success of the organisation; externally, it constructs an image of the organisation that anticipates the expectations of increasing societal and political pressures.

The lived narratives, in conformance with spoken text, were rather chaotic, consisting of sentence fragments, hesitations, contradictions, corrections and continuous meanderings back and forth in time. Yet the individual versions embedded in the aggregated lived version were remarkably similar. The majority of the respondents, without any prompts, mentioned the same seven change episodes and had similar story line for each one. The majority of the story lines can be summarised in the following description by one of the respondents:

*And this way of ... to not be able to ... I usually state it simply: that Alpha plays ... if you think of table tennis ... then we play back-spin balls, we play defensively ...*

To “play back-spin balls”, is a sports metaphor that epitomizes the notion of organizational change found in the lived narratives. To play back-spin balls means to wait for situations to arise, rather than forestalling or preceding them proactively. The lived narratives described the seven episodes as discrete circumstances demanding immediate direct responses whereas the same seven episode in the formal narrative form sequences in a proactive strategic plan to increase organizational efficiency and standardization. These differences in intent reflect two extreme ways of interpreting and enacting change: a reactive discontinuous process versus a proactive and continuous one.

The differences between the reality depicted in the formal, institutional version and that of the lived version is hardly surprising. Many researchers before us have shown similar difference between top-down and bottom-up processes and have attempted to understand how these two levels interact with each other. In his work on strategies Mintzberg (1985) presented two ends of an organisational continuum. At one end he located deliberate strategising as a top-down mode and at the other, an emergent and thorny bottom-up strategising mode. In this respect, we see the formal narrative as reflecting a symbolic rhetorical representation of deliberate strategising while the lived version is more reflective of an emergent ad hoc representation.

Burgelman (1991) conceptualised organisational change as an interaction between top-down strategic intent (a centrifugal force) and bottom-up autonomous processes (a centripetal force). He maintains that an organisation's degree of success will depend on top management's ability to balance a rational and stable strategic intent with autonomous strategic bottom-up emergent processes. Both Mintzberg's and Burgelman's reasoning are predicated on binary distinctions as driving forces for change in organisations, which they attempt to interpret and map in conceptual models. Although such models are no doubt useful, they present only one, or maybe two, realities, which the researcher has chosen to privilege, ignoring the multiple realities that coexist and contend for primacy and legitimacy in a given context. Moreover, the reality that they privilege may be quite different from the negotiated cognitive consensual logic, which has come to be dominant in the organisation over time.

Underpinning a narrative approach is the belief that no single representation of change "has a monopoly on "truth"" (Brown et al, 2009) over any other. For this reason, a narrative approach can be an insightful complement to other approaches to the study

of organising and change processes. Here the lived versions are those narrated by the managers themselves. Since their stories had so many similar points of reference, it can be argued that the aggregated version reflects a dominant reality in the organisation, and that it is likely to influence the way in which other employees construe change over the given period (Lynn, 1990). However, it is important to point out that it is not the relationships between the formal and the lived version that is of interest, but rather their influences on interpretations and enactments of change, which takes place when they come into play, are engaged with and result in an uptake.

### **Implications for our case and construction**

A well-rehearsed myth about the construction industry is that it is conservative and slow to change. Construction is commonly characterized as a “backward industry”, and in particular, one that fails to innovate in comparison to other sectors (Winch, 2003: 651). It has been criticized for not being able to adopt techniques that have improved performance in other industries (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). While some of the critics seem to conclude that the alleged inability to change lies in industry traditions and an *inherent* reluctance to change (SOU, 2002), others have argued that the practices within the construction industry are in fact attempts to cope with the relatively higher complexity of construction projects, and that these industry specific *circumstances* favour short-term productivity over innovation (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). From this point of view, the discussion regarding change in construction is split in two camps: those seeing the construction industry as an industry inherently reluctant to change, and those seeing construction-industry-specific circumstances as the main obstruction relative to other sectors.

Others have, however, questioned the myth. Winch (2003) did a cross-sectoral comparison between the construction industry and the auto industry (often held as an

exemplar) and argued that there is no clear evidence that the construction industry is doing any worse (or better) in terms of innovations than any other industry. Fernie et al (2006) suggest that reforms concerned with change in construction are acontextual, unreflective and insufficient in providing explanations for the relationship between industry practices and performance. They argue that within the reform movement there is an over emphasis on best practices, directing attention away from in-depth understanding current practices and change within the industry. They advocate closer examination of both current industry processes and practices as well as past change initiatives in order to enhance the contextual understanding.

We argue that this study can contribute to insights into how changes are interpreted and acted upon in construction. The dominant lived narrative of “playing back-spin balls” may very well be an organizational self-reinforcing mechanism that has shaped the discourse of change (Geiger and Antonacopoulou, 2009) in the construction organisation studied, which in turn shapes the nature and sequence of the organizational life that it describes (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007). A dominant change narrative of playing “back-spin balls” can jeopardize deviating narratives of change (Buchanan and Dawson, 2007), including the formal narrative, as well as other change reform narratives (Fernie et al 2006).

These findings are not intended to nourish the myth, but rather as a call for more narrative research to challenge or confirm the prevalence of the “playing back-spin balls” narrative in construction. While this mode of change arguably could be seen as a (retro)change trajectory, it cannot be established that it portrays an inherent reluctance of the industry to change (SOU, 2002). It could, in another story, be depicted as good practice in particular industry circumstances (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

To conclude, we want to go back to where we started with the notion of “organisational becoming” (Tsoukas and Chia 2002: 570). The two narratives we have examined, as well as our own, depict different “realities” of past change events in the organisation; we have argued that the lived narrative depicts the dominant reality-for-now and would therefore need to be included when theorising change in construction. It is the lived narratives that epitomise the organisational “becoming”, even if, as in this case, becoming may be a reinforcement of what is. The formal version on the other hand is more of a symbolic artefact of the organisation as having “become”. If there is a “truth”, it may lie somewhere in between!



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