Organizational identity and legitimacy negotiations through dominant and counternarratives

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Organizational identity is by Hatch and Schultz (2008) argued to be constructed through identity conversations between outsiders, who’s external discourse forms the organizational image, management, who’s official stories narrate the organizational vision and the employees’, who’s individual narratives are rooted in the organizational culture. The interplay between outsiders, management and employees has been studied both in contexts of identity threats posed by a poor organizational image (Dutton & Duckerich, 1991) as well as within celebrity organizations (Morsing, Kjærgaard and Ravasi). The ambition of this paper is to contribute to this line of research by proposing a narrative approach to the study of organizational identity formation (Brown, 2006; Chreim, 2005; 2007; Coupland & Brown, 2004; Humphreys & Brown, 2002), with a specific focus on the role of ‘counter-narratives’ (Bamberg and Andrews, Boje, 2006; Linde, 2001; 2009).

Bamberg and Andrews (2004, p.x) state that ”[c]ounter-narratives only make sense in relation to something else, that which they are countering. The very name identifies it as a positional category, in tension with another category”(Bamberg and Andrews 2004: x). We depart from Lindes (2001, 2009) notion of counterstories as “(…) accounts explicitly oppositional to specific, and usually more official, accounts” (Linde, 2009: 200) to advance our theoretical understanding of counternarratives and their performative role in negotiating organizational identity and legitimacy. Inspired by the work of Boje (1995; 2001; 2006; 2008; 2011) who claim that ‘organizations exists to tell their collective stories, to live out their collective stories, to be in constant struggle over getting the stories of insiders and outsiders straight’ (1995, p.1000) we study narratives and fragments of storytelling as a web of voices constantly constituting and negotiating
organizational identity (Humle, 2013; 2014). In this way we are able to avoid the static dichotomy between master and counternarrative and still use the concept of counterstories (Linde, 2001; 2009) as a valuable tool in studying the tensions between official, dominant and discursively powerful voices of e.g. management and the media and the constant struggle of organizational members in making sense of their every day work life and negotiating individual and collective organizational identity constructions.

**Generation and analysis of empirical data**

In this paper we investigate the organizational identity formation processes in a highly contested organization, a European National Rail Service E-rail, which is often portrayed in the media as an illegitimate provider of public transportation due to poor service. The empirical material consist of 20 interviews with ticket inspectors, news paper articles, as well as ’management texts’ manifested in power point presentations and talks at information meetings about the role of ticket inspectors in improving the organizational identity to become more service oriented. We identify and examine the narratives in this empirical material by focusing both on their structural as well as their performative character (Riesmann, 1983) specifically related to strategies of sensebreaking and sensegiving (Pratt, 2000)

**Findings**

We find that the media’s narratives of the organization, and in particular the role of ticket collectors, become dominant in the sense that they direct organizational actions, by naturalizing a certain world view, which management and employees’ work hard to reframe. Management construct counternarratives, which serves both sensebreaking and sensegiving purposes against the media’s tale. Similarly, the ticket inspectors constructs sensebreaking and sensegiving
counternarratives against both the media and management. Interestingly, we also find a second set of more fragmented, subtle, and fragile counternarratives among ticket inspectors, opposing their own more articulated and persistently performed counternarratives. Through this polyphony of narratives we critically investigate the terms “dominating” and “counternarratives” and contribute by proposing that organizational members and external stakeholders are constantly chasing multiple storylines and performing both potentially legitimate and illegitimate organizational identities.

**Contributions**

In this paper we see the organization as a story telling system (Boje, 2001) and contribute by highlighting the role of dominant and counter narrative in organizational identity formation processes as a web of stories performed and negotiated by organizational members and external stakeholders. While counternarratives may be viewed as ‘troublesome’ by traditional management studies, we argue that counternarratives have productive and performative powers such as giving voice to the silenced and challenge the status quo. Furthermore counternarratives make room for multiple understandings of organizational identity to co-exist making it possible for organizational members to perform and construct different meanings and storylines simultaneously and expand organizational actions.
References


