Organizational narratives as indicators for organizational development: a qualitative case study of design thinking practice and change

Lyngroes Fladmose, Anne

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University of Southern Denmark
Anne Lyngroes Fladmose
Contents

Project description: motivation and purpose .................................................................................................. 3
Research questions ............................................................................................................................................ 4
Research positioning ......................................................................................................................................... 4
Related research ................................................................................................................................................ 5
Theory ................................................................................................................................................................ 5
Empiricism ......................................................................................................................................................... 6
Methodology – narrative inquiry ...................................................................................................................... 7
Literature ........................................................................................................................................................... 9
Project description: motivation and purpose

This thesis aims to show how organizational narratives and the work practice of design thinking are interrelated. The purpose behind this is to accommodate recent proposals of theory-practice gap in narrative research (A. S. Bager, 2019; A. S. Bager & Lundholt, In press; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2008) and encourage beneficial implications to organizational development. It is stated in narrative inquiry, that narratives play a significant role in organizational contexts (Boje, 2001; Frandsen, Kuhn, & Lundholt, 2017; Lueg, 2018). According to narrative studies, narratives have a pervasive impact on human behavior, identity-formation and sense-making concerning organizational efforts and performance (Brown, Stacey, & Nandhakumar, 2008; Weick, 1995). Still, evidence is under examined regarding the role of organizational narratives as an approach to tangible and concrete managerial work practices. In this aspect, design thinking work practice is well suited as narrative implicational research subject, since the field is experiencing difficulties with organizationally embedding of outcomes (Liedtka, 2015). The design thinking approach is criticized for lack of progression in providing organizational and social change (Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018; Feldman & Boult, 2005; U. Johansson & Woodilla, 2011; Liedtka, 2015). For this reason, managerial intentions are challenged especially regarding implementation and making organizational viable results. Despite that, design thinking has for some decades been and still is a popular approach to business development (Cooper & Junginger, 2011) but often in the consideration as fast paced and rapid design-sessions with less strategic purpose or follow up (Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018; Friis & Kjær, 2016). This leaves the organizations decoupled (Brunsson, 1994) from the visionary intents, and it could be harmful to employee satisfaction and motivation. To explain what have caused this it requires insight into the design thinking discourse. It has been pointed that the field has paradigmatic inconsistency in the synergy between the two paradigms of ‘design’ and ‘business’ or management. The theory contains diametrically opposite epistemology of both design and management. Though, in the dominant discourse of design thinking a functionalistic and positivistic management paradigm is ruling (Johansson, U., Woodilla, & Çetinkaya, 2013; Kimbell, 2011). It is crucial to bring in perspectives of organizational related matters to maintain integrity in the design thinking field. The discourse calls for a paradigmatic intervention to explain organizational dynamics in design thinking practice. By exploring the presence of organizational narratives involved in design thinking processes, it brings in a nuanced picture of underlying organizational mechanisms which affect and are being affected by the develop process. By moving towards narrative inquiry, thereby moving away from an objective, positivistic and realistic research perspective, and instead focusing on research that embraces interpretation, understanding and meaning (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 9). This encourages an approach to recognizing organizational cohesion and dynamics. In a meta-perspective the thesis is a contribution to an ongoing paradigm change in leadership change management discourse. We have a current discussion of future leadership behavior and work ethics, which proposes a more sustainable mindset according to work processes and managerial communication behavior. It can
be a response to the mega trend of societal responsibility regarding our planet, environment and green thinking (Western, 2019).

Research questions
1: How do narratives impact on change processes?
2: How do organizational narratives occur in relation to design thinking processes?

Research positioning
I position this thesis as a contribution to narrative research in the area of organizational narratology and the interest of organizational implications. As mentioned, the thesis goes into a movement of sustainable leadership and in this regard, the thesis is highly linked to change management perspectives. To broaden up the picture it can be argued, that the thesis elaborates on ‘organizational development’ (OD) standpoints, which is opponent to traditional and positivistic change management paradigms (Palmer, Dunford, & Akin, 2009). OD perspectives has strongly access to the paradigm shift in the leader discourse, by giving attention to work flows, learning aspects and continuity in change processes (Bradford & Burke, 2005). Humanistic psychology such as individual satisfaction and development at work places are central to this approach (Nicholl, 1998). As an important overlap with the narrative inquiry based research in this thesis, OD subscribes to sense-making principles (Lockett, Currie, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2014) and change communication approaches (Palmer et al., 2009).

The broader perspective as to narratology is communication and as to my thesis the branch of organizational communication. The field of organizational communication is broad, and I place my dissertation in the area of communicative constitution of organizations (CCO). CCO relies on the assumption that communication is the basis for organizing. It is opponent to more traditional perspectives on communication as something manageable that happens in different contexts in the organization (Schoeneborn & Vásquez, 2018). Organizational theory belongs to a huge area with variative paradigmatic standpoints. I work in the area of neo institutionalism. It is a cognitive approach which works on the assumption that organizations communicate and negotiate their ‘identity’ or ‘positioning’ at a macrolevel in relation to the environment and institutional community (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). The perspective stands that organizations emerge to become alike and show ‘isomorphism’ (Graf & Lueg, 2019; Lueg, 2018). It is concerned about behavior of people within institutions or organizations as to frameworks of power, rules and norms (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The CCO approach is linked to neo institutionalism because a prerequisite for organizational existence is institutional settings provided by human organized societies (McPhee & Zaug, 2000). In relation to CCO and neo institutionalism narratives appear as important fractions and parts in the formulation and understanding in the social context of organizing (M. W. Lundholt & Boje, 2018).
Related research

Taking a narrative approach according to development and strategic change in organizations is a popular topic and has become common in management research. The dialogue is for instance centered on terms of ‘change narratives’ (Dunford & Jones, 2000), and even managerial accounting has shown an increasing interest in narrative accounting (Laine & Vinnari, 2020). A change narrative according to development projects in organizations sets a common language of the development ‘journey’. It provides with strategic managerial facilitating techniques to project organizational issues up on narrative imagination, creation and conceptualization. It fits a development journey by showing a ‘before, middle and after’ setting to address that something new and unfamiliar is coming. The tool certainly has change management intents toward organizational development and sense making perspectives to accommodate what positivistic management addresses as change resistance (Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018). In this regard, suggestions are made in relation to narrative practice and how to apply organizational narrative perspectives as to strategic change (Dalpiaz & Di Stefano, 2018; Dunford & Jones, 2000).

Linking design and narratives is not a new research subject in relation to innovation, change and management. In the fields of design thinking and change management several combinations take place. The design process is often related to storytelling. It can be as an overall framing for the process itself. For instance, in service design projects where the customer journey is highly metaphorically applied (Grimaldi, Fokkinga, & Ocnarescu, 2013; Stickdorn & Schneider, 2011). Another aspect is where storytelling is attached to the designed. To change a framing or story according to the values of certain products. It is aimed at the consumer and how the consumer derives value from a product (Beckman & Barry, 2010). In both cases it is recognized that the narrative or storytelling makes an impact on the company organization and undergoes a process of change and self-perception in effect. It is suggested in the field of design thinking to draw more concern into the relationship between design thinking development and organizational development and change processes (Elsbach & Stigliani, 2018). It has been suggested to include perspectives of individual cognition and decision-making in the design thinking innovation process (Liedtka, 2015).

Theory

The theoretical canvas applied in this thesis is narrative inquiry and theory according to leadership discourse and change management.

Narrative inquiry:

The aim and research methodology are anchored in narrative inquiry. Theory in the narrative field will be addressed in different ways. It occurs as fundamental understanding for organizational dynamics, as a research area and as a research methodology.
The method in applying organizational narratives has dual character. First, it provides strategically managerial frameworks of storytelling tactics. Second, it gives understanding for organizational aspects when dealing with implementation of complex process outcomes. It can be explored as a net of complex and interrelated processes according to ongoing associations of understanding and existence formulation (Bamberg, 2005; Boje, 2001). The narrative theory will show as sense-making approaches (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004; Weick, 1995), small stories (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), narrative positioning, identity (Bamberg, 1997), grand narratives, antenarratives, narrative methods such as story networking and narrative analysis (Boje, 2001), counter-narrative perspective (Andrews, 2002; Frandsen et al., 2017), storytelling and storymaking (A. S. Bager & Lundholt, In press) and related theory such as intertextuality, multimodality and semiotic.

The broader perspective of changing leadership discourse:

The discussion will include managerial aspects such as organizational development approaches (OD), communication paradigms and paradoxes (M. Lundholt & Uldall, 2019), situational leadership (Blanchard, Hersey, & Johnson, 1969), learning theory (Manolis, Burns, Assudani, & Chinta, 2013), u-theory (Scharmer, 2016) and systemic thinking (Senge, 1990).

Empiricism

The narrative inquiry plays out in design thinking work practice. The concept of design thinking is to combine the attitudes of ‘design’ and ‘business’ for development of e.g. products, organizational structures, strategies and services (Boland & Colluppy, 2004; Lawson & Dorst, 2009). Design thinking processes often have unclear goals with wicked problems, namely complex chains of related issues (Mason & Mitroff, 1981). The approach is chosen when a somewhat complex issue needs to be explored, mapped, conceptualized and clarified. Simply, it is about applying design methods and processes in non-design areas. For instance, to investigate customer satisfaction, use of service and products and interaction with an organization. In this regard, I will try to illuminate multiple angles of applying design thinking in practice. Several models of measuring “value” in the use of design thinking in companies have emerged (Best, Kootstra, & Murphy, 2010; Borja de Mozota, 2006; Braga, 2016; DanishDesignCentre, 2015; Junginger, 2009). They agree that design thinking occurs in different ways and levels in organizations. Junginger (2009) summarizes the viewpoints by addressing that design thinking occurs in organizations as a part or a whole, as external resource, as a part of organization, at the core of the organization or as integral to all aspects of the organization. The approach to design thinking within an organization varies and is movable in aspects of non design, design as form-giving, design as a process and design as a strategy (DanishDesignCentre, 2015). A common way of accessing design thinking based development is by making the company aware of its use of design thinking and propose incorporating design more holistically in the organization (Junginger, 2009). This measurable sequence in the use of design thinking goes well with the achieved positivistic
discourse in design thinking. My empiricism will be found in the span between design thinking ‘as an extern resource’ and ‘as an integral whole’ in two-four case studies. It can be a case study of a design thinking agency, and their interaction with customer organizations, a case study of a company who brings together a taskforce and applies design methods periodically to generate development, and a company who stresses to use design thinking as an ongoing holistically activity. The design thinking processes can be oriented towards everything as products, brand, service, strategy, projects and even multi-oriented, holistic problem solving. The case-organizations must be at different “design stages” according to the above span of applying design thinking.

Methodology – narrative inquiry

My research is anchored in narrative inquiry. As I am interested in understanding the phenomenon of narratives in managerial work practice, my methodology relies on qualitative research. It “forms around assumptions about interpretation and human action” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4) and comprises the motive which is narrative inquiry. Narratives as a method for research and on the same time the phenomenon of study (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). The narrative inquiry is conducted by case studies. As Pinnegar and Daynes points out, “(...) narrative inquirers embrace the power of the particular for understanding experience and using findings from research to inform themselves in specific places at specific times.” (2007, p. 24). Knowledge is contextual and “exists in the context of a narrative that gives it meaning, nuance, and application (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 27). It gives authentic and resonant research, which “allows wondering, tentativeness, and alternative views to exist” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 25). I acknowledge the relational understanding of the roles and interactions of the researcher and the researched which cannot be objectively separated. The purpose is not to address general conclusions but examine locally and specifically (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).

I agree with this line of thinking, when I examine the research question with two-four case studies. As Yin puts it, “case study allows an investigation to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events” (Yin, 1994, p. 3). Case study is all-encompassing, embraces complexity and provides distinctive and multi-variable data-selection to the research (Yin, 1994). Case study fits with situated narrative inquiry by enabling in-depth investigation in a real context (Yin, 1994). I state this inquiry as case study because “how” or “why” questions are being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no control.” (Yin, 1994, p. 9). According to Yin a case study can be descriptive, exploratory and/or explanatory (Yin, 1994). My research includes all three aspects simultaneously by

1: describing what is going on in the organizations and the presence of organizational narratives. I will ask questions such as: Who are involved in the design thinking processes. Where do they act out? What do the processes comprise? Do organizational narratives occur during the processes? Which narratives are present?
2: exploring the involvement, influence and affect of organizational narratives during design thinking processes. I will ask questions such as: how are the narratives related and interrelated to the development processes? How do narratives impact on the development processes? It may be necessary to follow narrative clues within the organization and draw lines to activities outside the specific time of research. An important dualization to study in this matter is on one side, how narratives are naturally present with no exposure from design thinking and on the other side, if and how the design thinking practitioners capture and apply the narratives, how design thinking processes create new narratives to the organization and how this is acted upon.

3: explaining the power and influence of narratives in the organizations. I will ask questions such as: why should narratives be considered in the specific context of the development process? Why should it be addressed on a managerial level?

The data could be gathered as field reports, interview, direct observation or video of flow and processes. The research design will be constructed by narrative theory.
Literature


