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Remembering Who WE Are: Memories of identity through storytelling

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Abstract

This article contributes to the on-going debate among scholars of organizational identity on collective and polyphonic identity formation processes. The article explores the interplay between individual and organizational storytelling by conceptualizing organizational identity construction processes as a web of storytelling practices, a memory system evoking a sense of coherence and nostalgia among organizational members. By drawing on the results of a narrative and ethnographic case study of a consultancy, the article aims to unfold the web of stories and storytelling practices in a single case organization. The analysis explores how members of this organization, through their everyday storytelling practices, created shared understandings of being members of a fantastic company while simultaneously telling critical counterstories. The analysis shows how organizational members learned to shape not only their stories of success but also their counterstories in ways that made them harmonize with the storytelling traditions of the organization. Furthermore, the concept of personal polyphony is suggested to describe how everyday work stories are antenarrative in the sense that the construction of self, work and the organization is never finished; it is an ongoing process of negotiating and handling many potential and sometimes contradictory storylines simultaneously.

Introduction

The study presented in this article focuses on matters of organizational identity and the interplay between organizational and individual identity construction processes by connecting these to the everyday storytelling practices of organizational members of an HR Consultancy. Primarily inspired by the work of Boje (1991; 1995; 2001; 2006; 2008; 2011) and Linde (2001, 2009), the organizational identity construction processes are conceptualized as a web of stories performed by all members of the organization in the storytelling work that goes into maintaining a sense of community and coherence across time and space, i.e. "(...) the work that keeps us US, whoever WE may be" (Linde, 2009: 224). In this way, the focus is not only on the polyphonic and fragmented nature of identity but also on the discussion of continuity vs. discontinuity (Chreim, 2005), which considers 'continuity and change not as contradictory elements, but

complementary and interwoven' (Chreim, 2005, p. 587). This paper adds to the literature by combining the study of narrative identity with the study of narrative memory and nostalgia, hereby contributing to the understanding of how identity is constructed and reconstructed across time and space. Hence, this article works to capture not only the multi-voiced, changeable nature of organizational identity, but also the work that goes into establishing a sense of community and coherence by organizational members. The article also contributes by adding the concept of personal polyphony (Belova, 2010; Pedersen & Johansen, 2012) to conceptualize how organizational members simultaneously perform official, positive stories and more critical counterstories. The present study shows how both types of stories have stabilizing effects in the sense that they create on-going memory systems of organizational identity. This is not in the shape of a core identity or stable corporate persona but as shared frames of reference connecting geographically separated employees in a constantly changing organizational environment.

Literature review

Identity and everyday storytelling practices

In recent years, there has been a growing interest among scholars of organizational identity in open-ended and polyphonic identity formation processes (Alvesson & Empson, 2008; Brown, 2006; Coupland & Brown, 2004; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kornberger & Brown, 2007). This development reflects an increased focus on the dynamic, intertwined nature of the relationship between individual, collective and organizational identity construction processes (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Thomas & Linstead, 2002). The complex understanding of identity within organization studies is by now well established (Chreim, 2005; Belova et al., 2008; Belova, 2010). Many scholars no longer view organizations as homogeneous, monolithic or closed units with firm, identifiable organizational identities. Rather, the individual, collective and organizational self-understandings are viewed as constantly being (re)constructed and enacted in daily dialog and practices in and around organizations, thus making them pluralistic and polyphonic (Hazen, 1993; Humphreys & Brown, 2002).

Similar to various other scholars, this study accentuates the narrative aspects of both individual and organizational identity (Brown, 2006; Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Chreim, 2005; 2007; Coupland & Brown, 2004; Cunliffe et. al. 2004; Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Driver, 2009; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Linde, 2001; 2009; Mishler, 1999; 2009; Pedersen, 2009; Søderberg, 2009). In particular, it builds on a body of literature focusing on the everyday storytelling practices in and around organizations as important in the understanding of organizational identity formation process, e.g. during periods of organizational change or uncertainties (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Chreim, 2007; Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Pedersen & Johansen, 2012; Søderberg, 2009).

Focusing on the interplay between storytelling and identity, Kornberger and Brown (2007), Brown (2006) and Coupland and Brown (2004) claim that organizational identities are comprised of identity-relevant narratives authored by their participants in an effort to understand the social entities of which they are members. Coupland and Brown (2004) oppose the notion that organizations have a corporate persona or a set of shared traits or beliefs and instead claim that "organizations are best characterized by having multiple identities, and that these identities are authored in conversations between notional 'insiders', and between notional 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (2004, p. 1325). Similarly, Boje claims that 'organizations exist 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). The present study is inspired by the work of Humphreys and Brown (2002) and their study of identity and identification processes in a UK-based institution of higher education that spotlights the role of narratives and the plurivocality of organizational identity constructions. Humphreys and Brown claim that both individual and collective identity and the processes of identification "that bind people to organizations are constituted in the personal and shared narratives that people author in their efforts to make sense of their world and read meaning into their lives" (2002, p. 421). By focusing on the interaction of the many voices, they connect matters of identity to the everyday life and storytelling work of organizational members.

In addition, like others (Boje, 1995; Chreim, 2005; Strangleman, 1999), Humphreys and Brown (2002), who point to the role and power of management in the construction of organizational identity, show how the efforts of senior management to author a monological, hegemonic organizational identity narrative were contested by organizational members and how primarily new employees were inclined to adopt and identify with the hegemonic, external and positive organizational identity stories voiced by management. Similarly, Harrison (2000) examines the efforts of senior managers of a large psychiatric research hospital in their desire to establish loyalty among the staff members to a singular institutional identity, concluding that this was not possible while "Individuals continually reimagined the Hanson (the

hospital) as they negotiated their sense of organizational self in the web of multiple factors that constructed their workplace social worlds, the institutional realities, the power structures in which they were embedded, and the professional or occupational discourses of the institution” (Harrison, 2000, p. 452). Building on this body of literature, the present study explores identity construction processes as a memory system, i.e. as a web of stories performed by members of the case organization when collectively reminding themselves who they are and why the work they do is meaningful and rewarding. This consequently turns the focus not only towards everyday storytelling practices but also towards memory and nostalgia as important concepts in the study of organizational identity.

Identity, storytelling, memory and nostalgia

Feldman and Feldman (2006) claim that remembering is crucial to maintaining a sense of continuity and shared identity in organizations by actively constructing meaning. According to them, work on organizational memory has primarily been interested in organizational cognition and often examines issues of organizational learning and decision making. They call for an alternative perspective and develop a conceptualization of organizational remembering as “a collective, historically and culturally situated practice, enacted by socially constituted persons in order to establish meaning” (Feldman & Feldman, 2006, p. 880). Various researchers accentuate the role of memory (Boje, 1991; Linde, 2001; 2009) and nostalgia (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Strangleman, 1999; Zerubavel, 1996) in the study of identity and storytelling. The theoretical framework of this article is strongly inspired by Boje’s (1991; 1995; 2001; 2006; 2008; 2011) work involving storytelling organizations and antenarrative storytelling and also by Linde’s (2001; 2009) work on narrative induction, paradigmatic storytelling and counterstories.

Relating organizational storytelling to memory, Boje (1991; 2001; 2006; 2008) has studied the interaction of stories and story fragments, and the multi-voiced, non-linear nature of organizational storytelling. According to Boje, organizational story telling is dynamic and characterized by, “(...) partial telling, story-starting and stopping behaviors, referencing intertextual in-betweenness, gaps, pauses, assumed agreements about story-wholeness that rarely get checked out” (2006, p. 34). Boje defines the storytelling organization as, “a collective system in which the performance of stories is a key part of members’ sensemaking and a means to allow them to supplement individual memories with institutional” (1991, p. 6). The present study links identity, storytelling and organizational memories by stressing that all individual memories are linked together by story performances, thus creating a web of storytelling practices.

The concept of antenarrative (Boje 2001; 2006; 2008; 2011) is adopted to explore the flow of storytelling. Boje defines antenarrative as “the fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation, a bet, a proper narrative can be constituted” (2001, p. 1). Antenarrative storytelling is always in the making (Boje, 2006) and Boje (2001) argues that storytelling organizations are antenarrative in the sense that it is “(...) a sensemaking that is coming into being but not/never finished or concluded in narrative retrospection” (2001, p. 4). In addition, antenarrative storytelling episodes form clusters of shared meanings related across time and place. The antenarrative vocabulary makes it possible to work with multiple pasts, presents and futures (Jørgensen in Boje, 2011) and to study the Tamara of organizational storytelling (Boje, 1995; 2001; 2006) going on in different times and places as a web of story performances related to each other, negotiating different notions of, for example, organizational identity.

Linde (2001, 2009), who also relates memory and identity to the everyday storytelling of organizations, claims that an analysis of identity is also an analysis of memory and time stating, “The very idea of identity requires at least some degree of continuity through time. An identity of this moment, not related to the past and not remembered in the future, hardly counts as an identity at all” (2009, p. 222). Linde (2001; 2009) builds on the results of an extensive ethnographic study of an insurance company to develop a theoretical framework for understanding how an institution and its members use stories to remember and to establish identity. Linde claims that ‘who am I, and who are we?’ are central questions of identity and that “The answers that are crafted for this central question of identity are important for any group that acts like a WE whether WE are a family, an insurance company or a nation” (2009, p. 221) and that answering these questions takes work primarily done through storytelling.

Also relevant to the present study, various authors have accentuated the role of nostalgia in the analysis of memory, positive stories and identity (Brown & Humphreys, 2002; Strangleman, 1999; Zerubavel, 1996). For example, Brown and Humphreys (2002) argue “That a focus on nostalgia permits us to better appreciate and to account for the temporal dimensions of organizational identity” (p. 143) and suggest that nostalgia provides access “(...) to a shared heritage of identity-relevant beliefs and values, functions as an emotional support during periods of change, and plays a role in individual-group identification” (p. 156). Strangleman (1999) claims that nostalgia is not only the passive emotion of older

employees but can be seen as a powerful and active tool in the hands of management, his study of the railway industry demonstrating that “(...) nostalgic feeling can be detached from direct lived experience” and that “nostalgic images and identities become reified and more easily manipulated” (p. 743). In this way, invoking the past can create nostalgia and powerful feelings, even among organizational members who have not experienced the events or time periods narrated.

Narrative induction, paradigmatic storytelling and counterstories

Within Linde’s (2001; 2009) framework of understanding, remembering becomes an event or an act and the focus is on the practices of remembering and the way in which members of an organization learn to shape their individual stories in certain ways. Linde’s (2001; 2009) notion of narrative induction captures how members of an organization learn to tell their stories in accordance with the storytelling traditions of the organization. Linde defines “(...) narrative induction as the process by which people come to take on an existing set of stories as their own story (...)” (2001, p. 608). It is the process by which new members learn the repertoire of organizational stories and how to tell the stories as part of their own stories so they are heard as members. The present study applies the analytical concept of narrative induction because it is a useful tool when studying membership formation and socialization, guiding our analytical attention to the dynamic interplay between individual and organizational storytelling and identity construction processes (Linde, 2009). One approach to studying narrative induction involves casting light on the small links and traces that exist between individual stories and the stories of the organization that indicate how people are induced into institutional membership and learn to shape their stories in appropriate ways. The process is ongoing because employment is a voluntary institutional membership that always remains open for reconsideration and that is continuously negotiated and reconstructed. Within this framework, remembering becomes a social event or practice that requires occasions; a story without occasions to be told will not be remembered or have an active life within the organization.

To explore how organizational identity narratives are performed and contested by members of the case organization, two of Linde’s concepts, paradigmatic stories and counterstories are utilized. Linde (2009), who defines paradigmatic narratives as exemplary stories of everyday life, states, “The patterns formed by these exemplary stories constitute the paradigmatic narrative. Thus, the paradigmatic narrative is defined as a discontinuous unit, consisting of the narratives told on a variety of occasions within a particular institution, which collectively constitute the model for a career within that institution” (p. 142). Paradigmatic stories concern ordinary members of an organization and form models of ordinary success. They also shape how to act within an organization in relationship to daily work, in addition to molding individual stories. Counterstories are defined by Linde as noisy silences that offer “(...) accounts explicitly oppositional to specific, and usually more official, accounts” (p. 200). Linde (2009) contends that the noisy silences within organizations are highly contextual and not absolute, stating, “what is unspeakable at the podium of a formal meeting is endlessly speakable in the bar after the meeting is over” (p. 220). Noisy silences are oppositional stories on matters that may not be spoken of officially but that are discussed nonetheless. They are the unofficial stories of the organization and because they are unofficial and oppositional, counterstories are often relatively unstructured and not systematically told. When studying counterstories, it is of interest to explore if they have a life within the institutions they criticize and also whether or not they succeed in creating an ongoing counter-memory.

Combining work on identity, storytelling, nostalgia and memory, I explore the storytelling work that goes into establishing organizational identity as a web of stories performed across time and space by all members of a single specific case organization. The concept of personal polyphony (Belova, 2010; Pedersen & Johansen, 2012) is proposed as a way of conceptualizing how individuals are able to perform both extremely positive and opposing critical counterstory lines simultaneously, not only on different storytelling occasions but sometimes even in the same storytelling performance. Personal polyphony indicates that we as individuals are not a stable unit and that we are able to perform many different notions and creative constructions of self, work and the organization that employs us.

Case, method and analysis

The empirical material used for this article is based on one case company, a Danish consultancy founded in 1996 that works with bridging people and work (e.g., recruitment, HR services and assisting the unemployed in their job search). From 2004-2010, the company expanded greatly from 30 employees and three offices to 140 employees and twelve offices. During the field work (2008-2010), the consultancy underwent multiple organizational restructurings and rounds of firing and relocation of employees due to changing markets and circumstances. The public part of the organization, i.e. working with unemployed candidates on behalf of the local authorities, was founded in 2003 and resulted in a less

homogenous organization because it separated employees into different business areas. The consultants' work was characterized by many daily encounters with job candidates and customers and the success of the company depended on the satisfaction of these two groups. Thus, the consultants were expected to present, narrate and enact positive images of the company and its products in their daily work practices. This made organizational identity and the answer to the questions 'who are we and how we do work' a prime concern of both management and consultants (Alvesson, 2001), which was reflected in daily practices, where numerous stories of success, collaboration, fun and commitment were shared on the company intranet and at social and professional gatherings.

As a narrative and ethnographic study (Czarniawska, 2007; Van Maanen, 1988), this case study is inspired by research that applies ethnographic approaches to studying the many voices of organizations in order to understand the everyday construction of individual and organizational identity (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Linde, 2001; 2009). This study is also influenced by researchers who accentuate the usefulness of ethnographic and narrative methods in the study of everyday work and work life (Boje 1991; Barley & Kunda, 2001; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). The field work lasted approximately two years (2008-2010) and was conducted by the author, spending, on average, half of my time as an industrial PhD student doing qualitative research on matters of work identity and retention of knowledge workers. The position awarded me with a unique opportunity to follow the everyday life of organizational members, engage with managers and employees, and attend all types of organizational activities, e.g. staff meetings and social and professional gatherings, thus allowing me to "(...) share first hand environment, problems, background, language, rituals, and social relations of a more-or-less bounded and specified group of people" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 3).

This close affiliation awarded me with a rich access to the company; however, there were simultaneously also important questions of power and some difficulties in handling the divergent expectations of organizational members. To handle these difficulties, inspiration was derived from Czarniawska (2007), who claims that the role of the researcher is not to behave like a fly on the wall but to be respectful and sympathetic towards the people being studied and to take into account as many different views as possible. As a result, I attempted to listen open-mindedly to all members of the organization, as well as to make room for the polyphony of voices (Hazen, 1993) and the antenarrative character of their organizational storytelling (Boje 2001; 2006; 2008; 2011). I slowly learned to listen, resisting the urge to add narrative closure to the stories of self, work and the organization as they constantly emerged and changed across time and space. Simultaneously, the borders between the voices of managers and employees gradually became more nuanced and less rigid. I was fascinated by the eagerness of employees to co-author positive identity narratives about their 'amazing' employer and the company's 'remarkable' work. The issue of power, however, still remained relevant, the hegemonic efforts of management (Humphreys & Brown, 2002) and its preferences forming powerful voices in the web of positive storytelling practices, ultimately strongly affecting the narrative identity work (Humble, 2014; Mallet & Wapshott, 2012; Pedersen, 2008) of individual organizational members.

The empirical material is a combination of narrative interviews (Czarniawska, 2004; Riesmann, 2008) and ethnographic field work (Van Maanen, 1988; Czarniawska, 2007) that includes documentation such as PowerPoint presentations, posts on the company intranet and group emails. Thirty-two semi-structured narrative interviews were conducted with two types of consultants: 1) job consultants working with unemployed candidates and 2) personnel consultants conducting recruitment and other HR services. The narrative interviews lasted 1-2 hours and were all transcribed. Inspired by the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954; Czarniawska, 2004), the interview guide was designed to promote storytelling about work life and everyday work experiences. Thus, questions involving everyday work were asked, such as: "Can you tell me what you did yesterday?", "Can you tell me about a situation where you felt you did your job well?/Where you did not feel you were able to do your job well?". The interview guide was semi-structured and additional questions were always posed. The conversation in the interview was informed by and related to things observed or experienced while watching the consultants work, attending meetings, gatherings, etc.

Adopting a dialogical interpretation process of going back and forth between theory, method and the field, the material was collected and analyzed continuously (Renemark, 2007; Thisted, 2003). The analysis presented in this article is the result of an empirical tale that insisted on being told. The story of how members of this organization, through their everyday storytelling practices, created a shared sense of being members of a 'amazing' company, employing 'remarkable' people and doing 'remarkable' work while simultaneously telling critical counterstories of a heavy managerial focus on making money and of how demanding and exhausting consultancy work can sometimes be. The analysis explores this web of positive storytelling episodes and also of the counterstories (Boje, 1995; 2006; Linde, 2001;

2009) being performed simultaneously in other “rooms” of the Tamara (Boje, 1995; 2001; 2006), of organizational storytelling episodes happening at different locations simultaneously and across time and space.

The notion that the company was unique and fantastic, both as a place of work and in the services provided to customers and candidates, often formed a shared frame of reference when telling everyday work practice stories. The question arose as to how these positive storylines could continue to be so persistently performed even though the company underwent many organizational restructurings, rounds of firing, employees leaving and new ones entering, and despite the fact that employees were located at many different geographical locations and doing different types of work. Another aspect of relevance in the analysis was how quickly new members of the organization began to incorporate aspects of the positive storylines into their own narrative identity work. Taking an antenarrative approach was useful because it allowed the analysis of many different types of story performances as voices of the polyphonic dialogs as well as the examination of the many different conversations going on at the same time. As a result, I have explored both the official storytelling and the everyday storytelling of members of the organization, including both the unfinished story fragments and the more structured classic narratives comprising a plot with a beginning, middle and an end (Boje, 2008) to explore the web of positive storytelling practices and the performance of critical counterstories.

Analysis and findings

Stories about the ‘amazing’ company

According to Linde’s (2009) framework, remembering is a social event and act that requires occasions, and a story without occasions to be told does not have an active life within the organization. At the case company, positive stories of the organization and the work done were performed on many different storytelling occasions, among these were customer meetings, conversations with candidates, appraisal interviews and hallway conversations. Forming a meeting place for connecting geographically divided employees, mandatory company gatherings provided an occasion for remembering who the company was and they seemed to play an important role in the narrative induction of employees into organizational membership (Linde, 2001; 2009). While the field work was being conducted, company meetings for all employees took place four or five times a year to work on company values, strategies and visions. At company gatherings, the company’s past was used and invoked in many different ways by both management and employees. Thus, different stories were shared about how the company had a strong tradition for having fun, celebrating successes, throwing parties, playing and making a difference in the lives of others. In addition, stories about the company’s founders and the establishment of its values were also told, thus evoking the past and creating a sense of coherence and consistency among organizational members.

One of the gatherings I attended was Value Days 2010, a two-day company-wide annual event to work on the company’s four values, (mutual respect, collaboration, result creation and innovation). Extensive, on-going work was carried out in relation to the company’s values and each year a new book of values was written with stories and pictures from Value Days. In 2010, the CEO told the story of how the company values were founded in 2001 during a collaboration between managers and employees. The employees were also asked to discuss the values in relationship to their own values and beliefs and to relate the four values to their daily work practices. In this way a sense of nostalgia and positive emotions were evoked among employees, even the ones who had only been at the company for a short while, and a shared heritage of beliefs and values (Brown & Humphreys, 2002) was created among employees who were normally separated geographically. Evoking the past was a powerful tool in a constantly changing organization and demonstrates that “nostalgic images can be detached from direct lived experience” (Strangleman, 1999, p. 743). Consequently, stories of the past and company values created shared memories and were important voices in the identity construction dialogs while simultaneously inducing organizational members into a positive storytelling community.

In order to explore narrative induction more closely, this analysis exposes the links between the official storytelling done at company gatherings and the everyday storytelling of members (Linde, 2002; 2009). A prime place to investigate this was the company intranet, introduced in 2008, as it was a rich site for storytelling. Participation was low initially but by 2010 when the field work had been completed, the intranet was well established and well visited. Used for sharing information and for telling stories, it functioned as a meeting place, connecting employees on a more daily basis than company gatherings. Stories about the ‘amazing’ company doing ‘remarkable’ work were invoked in various ways on the company intranet. Managers, for example, praised employees and departments for performing well and employees admired co-workers and shared thoughts about how and why they were happy to be part of the company. As a result, the

intranet became an important storytelling ‘event’ for remembering and creating shared understandings of organizational identity.

Two types of work practice stories, which I label ‘success’ and ‘sunshine’ stories, were in particular often performed by consultants on the company intranet. Covering the everyday work of consultants, these stories seemed to be paradigmatic narratives (Linde 2001; 2009), in the sense that they contained examples of the everyday life of the organization and they were typical stories often shared. The paradigmatic stories of the company differed compared to the ones presented by Linde (2009) in that they were not about the ideal course of life within the institution; instead, they were about everyday work and about why the work done by consultants was meaningful and rewarding.

Success stories. On the intranet, success stories were often performed and comprised everyday work situations characterized by the collaborative success of consultants and satisfying solutions for customers and candidates. The success stories often focused on the extraordinary efforts and personal commitment of the consultants, like working quickly, helping candidates, satisfying customers and ousting competitors. An analysis of the success stories on the company intranet revealed various small links between individual storytelling and stories of values, strategies and the company spirit and history shared at company gatherings and other official, formalized storytelling occasions (Linde, 2009). For example, most of the success stories either explicitly or implicitly referred to two of the company values: result creation and collaboration. Every time a success story was told, the claim was made that the “goal in every relationship and task was to create results for our clients and candidates” (company webpage), and in almost all of the success stories, collaboration was either implicitly or explicitly accentuated as the main cause of the positive outcome of the challenge or situation:

At 1:30 pm yesterday, Telemo (private costumer) called with an order for an administrative employee who could start today at 8:00 am and stay at least one month. Mia and I made calls but without luck. At 2 pm we called Jens and Clara in Esbjerg (one of the public offices of the company at that time) and asked whether they perhaps had a candidate from their group who would be interested in the temporary job. Five minutes later Jens called back and said they had two young women who were ready. Flying (metaphorically), I landed at the office by 2:30 pm and interviewed the two young women, whose profiles, both in terms of qualifications and personality, were a perfect match. The one candidate started in the temporary position today at 8 am. Voila! This will not be the last success story about collaborative efforts between the divisions. Clara and Jens – you rock! Thanks for the help! Hugs from Mia and Anna (Consultant, company intranet)

In this story, as in many other success stories, the plot involved a successful resolution resulting from efficient collaboration. As was often the case, colleagues were praised and there was a reference to the fun and rapid pace of the job. Sharing this story on the company intranet, Mia and Anna displayed several aspects typical of this type of story performance. They presented themselves as dedicated consultants determined to solve even difficult customer requests and praised their colleagues, accentuating the importance of collaboration between company entities. The story performance episode can be seen as an example of the antenarrative character of organizational storytelling (Boje, 2001; 2006; 2008; 2011) in the sense that it is part of several ongoing dialogs and intertextually connected to, e.g. other story performances of collaborative success and of having fun while working hard. Another example of the links between official storytelling and everyday storytelling practices was the notion of 108%. An idiosyncratic organizational term introduced in 2008 as one of four headlines of a performance culture: *108% means giving more than is expected by customers, candidates and ourselves* (CEO Presentation, 2008). The notion of 108% was adopted by members of the organization and often used when telling success stories on the company intranet and when praising colleagues for performing well. This is similar to the use of the word ‘remarkable’, which had been incorporated in the everyday storytelling practices of the organization, particularly by management, thereby making a reference to the third one of the four company visions, “We want to be a remarkable company on two bottom lines (the financial and the human/ethical)” (CEO Presentation, 2008). The company values, 108% and ‘remarkable’ are examples of the links between the individual storytelling and the more official stories of the organization, indicating the narrative induction of employees into a storytelling community (Linde, 2009).

Sunshine stories. Similar to success stories, sunshine stores were often shared by members of the organization and also focused on sharing work experiences characterized by a positive outcome. They were, however, different in that sunshine stories centered on one plot, namely making a genuine difference for others. There are numerous stories of this nature in

the empirical material, both from interviews and from the company intranet. They are defined by an explicit reference to a discursive, mutually shared understanding among the organization's consultants that this type of work is meaningful because opportunities exist to make a genuine difference in the lives of others:

Hello Everyone!

We received a candidate in October 2007 ravaged from many years of alcohol abuse. He had no hopes for the future and expected to drink himself to death shortly. He had previously worked as a truck driver and as a chauffeur for public officials, but had lost everything due to alcohol abuse. After a few conversations, he gained a sense of hope and started to see opportunities for him to change his life. He decided that he wanted to apply for treatment for alcohol abuse from the municipality, because he realized that this was his primary barrier. The municipality kept him waiting and a while later he collapsed at the job centre with cramps and failing organs – he was taken away in an ambulance. After about 14 days, he returned and asked us for help to get back on his feet. Together we decided that he must stop drinking immediately. He has now been sober for nearly two months. He has just contacted me to tell me that he 'unfortunately' could not attend our meeting today because yesterday's job interview paid off. He has been offered his dream job: driving a 16 ton truck 37 hours a week plus over time. As he puts it himself, 'It's fantastic to be allowed once again to sit here in my truck and look down on the others'.

Let us give him the RESPECT he deserves!!! Kind regards, Jakob (Consultant, company intranet)

Similar to this story, sunshine stories often referred to specific instances or episodes where consultants, through their daily work, alone or in collaboration with co-workers, were able to improve the lives or future prospects of job candidates. In these types of stories, the plot often centered on the troubles and destiny of the candidates, whose life situations improved in the hands of the company and its consultants. These stories, which often contained an element of drama and focused on the progress made, described situations and destinies where the likelihood of failure was great. At the end of the story, a reference to one of the corporate values, respect, was given, demonstrating the active presence of the values in the everyday storytelling work of consultants. The analysis of the transcribed narrative interviews revealed several similar sunshine stories, whose form and presentation were similar across the different types of presentation (intranet and interviews), which indicates that they had become well established ways of telling work practice stories in this particular organization.

Being available to all members of the organization, the success and sunshine stories worked as models of how to shape individual stories. They were exemplary stories for the consultants to tell in the sense that they summarized some of the desired qualities of consultants (the ability to collaborate, work fast, be caring, show respect towards others, produce results, etc.) and they framed the meaningfulness and potentially satisfying aspects of the work done. The success stories modeled how to perform success publicly and how to tell successful stories of everyday work. The sunshine stories modeled how to subscribe meaning to the work done by consultants in their everyday encounters with job candidates and customers. Jointly, they formed paradigmatic stories of how to be an appropriate member of the organization. In addition, they were important voices in the web of storytelling episodes central to the identity construction processes of the consultancy.

Company gatherings and the intranet were important storytelling occasions. The web of positive storytelling episodes, however, also consisted of other types of story performances on more intimate storytelling occasions such as interviews, hallway conversations and lunch breaks:

This is clearly the greatest place I've ever worked. And for several reasons. First, it's because what we do is, is so incredibly enriching. Just last Friday we were at a get-together with friends and while hanging out people asked what I do and I can still get excited when I tell them about what I do and what this company does. And that's cool (...) What we do for our customers, find them employees, help them when an employee is let go, filling temporary positions, what our job consultants do when helping the unemployed. It's like that, like that all the way around, including the courses we do; we're on a par with pharmaceutical companies when it comes to helping

others. We do something for others; there's no doubt about that and that's an incredibly great feeling that I've never experienced before in other places (Narrative interview, consultant)

This story performance episode is not a classic narrative retrospective performance; instead, it is an example of how story work in organizations involves contextually embedded performances connected to other conversations not finalized but unfolding in the storytelling episode (Boje 2001; 2006; 2011). Elaborating on why he likes to work in this organization, another consultant explains:

I immediately liked the spirit of things here and I'm really happy about it. I like the atmosphere. You can be serious and have fun. Messing around and playing games is perfectly acceptable and people think it's fun, then afterwards you get serious again. It's fantastic that I'm allowed to say what I think at meetings; there aren't so many restrictions (Narrative interview, consultant)

These types of positive descriptions of the company as a meaningful work community with a special spirit, openness and as a place to have fun often appeared, for example, during independent visits to the different offices, while accompanying the CEO on her regular visits to the various locations and during interviews with consultants. In addition, the transcripts of the narrative interviews show that many references were made to the stories of the 'amazing' company and words like joy, success, quality, a special company spirit and collaboration were often used. The organization was frequently narrated as a special place containing a unique sense of joy and happiness. As one consultant explains, "There's just a sense of joy that spreads everywhere and when you meet people, everyone I meet, when I visited the head office, when I met the CEO, everybody greets you with a big smile. It's simply a cool company; you can just feel that people are happy". Management had a strong and powerful voice in articulating positive images of the organization both externally and internally. However as the above presentation demonstrates the stories of the 'amazing' company were not monolithic or hegemonic, authored solely by management (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Instead they consisted of many different storylines and are better described as a web of positive storytelling episodes producing and reproducing shared references and mutual understandings of why this was an 'amazing' company.

Stories of hard and demanding consultancy work

While studying the web of stories creating positive images of the company, the question of what was left out of these positive story performances simultaneously arose. Beyond the map of successful storytelling episodes was the interplay between outsider and insider, i.e. the stories not admitted to the cell (Boje, 2006), in this case the living story networks (Boje, 2001; 2011), concerning why this was not always a fantastic workplace and why the work done was not always rewarding and fulfilling. The storytelling episodes that created the shared identity stories of the 'amazing' company were public and numerous, the counterstories were not as easily available. There was no room on the company intranet or at company gatherings for performing negative everyday work stories. Instead, they were banished or relegated to more intimate storytelling occasions like coffee breaks, water cooler conversations or the interview situation.

One feature of the critical work practice stories of consultants was that they were often more fragmented and incomplete. The analysis shows that these antenarrative storytelling episodes formed clusters of counterstories and two such clusters turned out to be particularly prevalent. First, there were the counterstories about a lack of quality due to time constraints and the heavy managerial focus on making money and, second, there were counterstories about how demanding and exhausting consultancy can be sometimes. The narrative interviews comprise several stories describing situations or periods where the consultants did not feel they were able to do their job well or perform with the desired amount of care and quality of service towards customers and candidates. One consultant explains:

I simply had too many tasks. It meant that there was less quality and the status was lacking. I hate when I don't get to go out and greet the candidates. Things should be in order. We should stick to what we promise. Otherwise it's not quality (Narrative interview, consultant).

Like this example, the counterstories often referred to unspecified habitual events, ordinary in the sense that they occur more than once. They were counterstories to success and sunshine stories in that they were about not being able to perform successfully or to help others. Moreover, they were counterstories to the official stories of the 'amazing', value-based company presented at company gatherings and other official organizational storytelling occasions (Linde, 2009). In this way, they referred to the same frame of reference but took on an opposing stance. Also, they often expressed

a specific or implicit critique of management, for example, by claiming that the focus on making money was too prominent on the management agenda:

There aren't enough people – if that changed, things could become better. Then there would be time to get them [the candidates] out. I don't have time to escort the candidates. It seems as if we have to become worn out (...) we say it every day, and we have done so for months, but nobody comes, it's getting to be too much now (Narrative interview, consultant).

As in this example, the storytelling episodes forming organizational counterstories were often characterized by their fragmented and unfolding nature. There was no beginning or end and, hence, no narrative closure. They were incomplete in the sense that the stories were never finished (Boje, 2001; 2006). The stories about a lack of time and quality were unspeakable in formal company gatherings; however, they were the noisy silences of the organization often presented during intimate encounters. As Linde claims, it is “difficult and painful for a member of any institution to raise doubt about the legitimacy and competence of one’s management” (2009, p. 219), which can explain the open-ended nature of the counterstories. Room for change was still an option, as well as for the opportunity to create more meaningful stories of self, work and the organization in the near future. In the interview situation, such constructions were often only minutes away or even presented in the same storytelling episode.

The second type of counterstories was about the potentially demanding and strenuous aspect of consultancy work. This type of story was a well-established, often-told counterstory that stood in opposition to the harmony of the stories presented of success and doing work that makes a difference in other people’s lives:

What surprises me is how strenuous it is to deal with many people during the day; how exhausting it can be (...) it surprised me how hard it actually is (...) I get tired; this has meant I'm tired when I come home. And that's affected my family. In that way, it's been hard on me. In that way, I think that this type of job makes me use a lot of energy (Narrative interview, consultant).

What makes people tired and grumpy is when they absorb things (...) I've learned something about distancing myself somewhat to it and not to stress out about achieving the goals (Narrative interview, consultant).

There were both similarities and differences between the two types of counterstories. They share a mutual reference to the stories about, for example, creating success and having fun while working. In this way, their meaning was created in reference to what they were not, which appears as a temporal side shadow (Pedersen 2009) of what could have been but was not possible. The difference between the two types of counterstories presented here was that the stories of the demanding and strenuous aspects of the job, contrary to the stories about the lack of quality, were not necessarily critical towards management and the foundation of the company. Consequently, they were speakable on more occasions, also when management was represented. A well-established assumption in the company was that it can be tiring and hard work and that not everyone thrives with constant customer and candidate contact. Many of the consultants discussed this among themselves and with their managers, for example, during monthly goal assessment interviews or annual employee progress evaluations. However, neither of these two types of counterstories were represented on the company intranet or as an official topic at social gatherings. The persistent reappearance of these counter hegemonic discourses during field work nevertheless indicated that they not only had a life within the organization they criticized, but that they also succeeded in creating ongoing counter memories (Linde, 2009).

The issue of narrative induction is also interesting in relationship to the counterstories. Although fragmented and open-ended, they shared similarities regarding themes and form of presentation, thus indicating that members learned to shape not only their stories of success but also their counterstories in ways that made them harmonize with the storytelling traditions of the organization. This process indicates that new members not only learned how to be appropriately successful and public members, but also how to present critique and counterstories in a way that made them heard as members of the storytelling community.

Personal polyphony. The analyses of the transcribed interviews revealed expressions of personal polyphony (Belowa, 2010; Pedersen & Johansen, 2012), in the sense that the consultants were both able to relate their own stories to the shared constructions of the ‘amazing’ company, as exemplified above, and to simultaneously express the less positive aspects of

not always being able to perform well, of how demanding the work sometimes was and of why this was not always a wonderful place to work. The analysis accentuates the many different possible contractions of self, work and the organization and how the consultants in their story work constantly navigate and negotiate different notions. The personal polyphony was sometimes expressed on different occasions across time and space. Thus, one storytelling event allowed the consultants to perform one type of story, e.g. a success story on the company intranet, while other situations made room for other types of stories to be performed. A single story performance, however, often expressed both potentially positive and potentially negative aspects of being a consultant employed by this organization:

I had a really busy period last summer when I was here alone. Orders poured in and it's fantastic, I love my job, but you can only handle a certain amount of work and the day turns out not to be good if you've suddenly been at work for 12-14 hours and you've done that for many days. At some stage, the air goes out of the balloon and you can't do more. Then it's not fun. And when your boss doesn't even call or is impossible to get a hold of, then you haven't had a good work day (Narrative interview, consultant).

This story performance illustrates the on-going, polyphonic and often fragmented nature of making sense in relation to work and the organization when sharing everyday work stories. As in many other story performance episodes, work is constructed as both fantastic and hard. Most consultants were more positive than negative in their stories of work. However, the stories about why this was not always a rewarding workplace often expressed quite extreme emotions of distress and resentment towards management. This example also shows how everyday work stories are antenarrative in the sense that the construction of self, work and the organization is never finished or complete narrative retrospection, it is an ongoing process of negotiating and handling many potential and sometimes contradicting storylines at the same time. Combining narrative induction with the understanding of organizational storytelling as antenarrative and the concept of personal polyphony makes it possible to incorporate into the study of identity formation the fragmented, polyphonic and dynamic nature of organizational storytelling as well as to address the memory work that goes into establishing a sense of continuity and the work of individual members to handle the many possible and sometimes contradictory stories of the organization.

Discussion and conclusion

This article explores the relationship between organizational identity, memory, nostalgia and storytelling, presenting an empirical analysis of the storytelling practices of members of an organization when collectively reminding themselves of who they are and what makes the work they do meaningful and rewarding. Theory on identity, memory, nostalgia and storytelling practices was combined to build a framework that captures the many voices of the organization, the article contributing to the field by exploring complex and dynamic organizational identity formation processes as a web of stories performed, shaped and reshaped by all members of the organization in the storytelling work that goes into maintaining a sense of community and coherence across time and space. Thus, this article captures and explores matters of “continuity and change not as contradictory elements, but complementary and interwoven” (Chreim, 2005, p. 587).

The analysis showed how members of the case organization co-authored stories about the ‘amazing’ company on many different storytelling occasions. Different management-initiated storytelling events, such as introduction days, social and professional gatherings and the company intranet connected the geographically spread employees and helped create mutual understandings and shared references. Such occasions were not necessarily designed primarily for remembering “who WE are” (Linde, 2009) but were nevertheless used for remembering by members of the organization. The positive stories were numerous and formed an important part of how members of this particular organization worked to make sense of their everyday work life and to construct identity. This positive storytelling community seemed to strongly affect the narrative identity work (Humble, 2014; Mallet & Wapshott, 2012; Pedersen, 2008) of individuals and the paradigmatic stories of success and of making a genuine difference in the lives of others. In addition to forming models of everyday work and of how to be an appropriate member of the organization, the positive storytelling community affected the story work of individuals in the sense that any critique appeared as a break with the community. Because everybody eagerly performed stories of success and of how much they loved the organization and their job, a sense of failure or lack of joy about work becomes an excluding factor.

The analysis also showed how the web of positive storytelling episodes was being contested by expressions of personal polyphony (Belowa, 2010; Pedersen & Johansen, 2012) and by the performance of counterstories (Linde, 2001;

2009) – the noisy silences performed in hallways and during interviews but not as part of the official storytelling of the organization. The analysis of personal polyphony and counterstories showed how the positive identity stories of the ‘amazing’ company, employing ‘remarkable’ employees and doing work that makes a genuine difference, although eagerly performed by all members of the organization on different occasions, did not create uncontested identity stories. In the narrative interviews, personal polyphony was expressed in the sense that the consultants were all able to relate their everyday work practice stories to the positive notions of the company; less positive stories of not having fun and of working too hard were also performed simultaneously, however. Two counterstory clusters seemed to be particularly prevalent, one involving the lack of quality due to time constraints, and the second involving how demanding and exhausting consultancy can be sometimes. These two types of counterstories were characterized by their persistent reappearance across time and space, thus indicating that they succeeded in creating ongoing counter memories and that members of the organization learned to shape not only their positive work stories in a way that made them correspond with the storytelling tradition of the organization but also their more critical and negative ones.

The concept of narrative induction has been fruitful because it aids in addressing the question of how shared notions of identity (although polyphonic and dynamic) are reproduced and enacted through time, in the “work that Keeps US us whoever WE may be” (Linde, 2009, p. 220). The analysis of paradigmatic stories and counterstories showed many links between individual storytelling and the more official storytelling indicative of narrative induction. However, if one is not careful, the concept of narrative induction easily frames a rather static, unrefined analysis portraying the official storytelling as “superior” to other storytelling performances. Instead, combining narrative induction with Boje’s (2001; 2006; 2008; 2011) understanding of antenarrative organizational storytelling offers a more dynamic understanding of organizational storytelling practices and avoids the indication of a causal relationship between one type of storytelling influencing all other storytelling episodes. Management did have a strong and powerful voice, however, that became even more powerful when all members of the organization eagerly co-authored stories of an ‘amazing’ company, doing ‘remarkable’ work.

Another interesting aspect of the analysis is the collective narrative production of how to be an appropriate member of the organization, i.e. the disciplinary function of the storytelling webs of positive storytelling episodes. The exemplary stories told by managers and employees formed paradigmatic stories of how to be an appropriate member of the organization. In the case presented, the criteria are demanding. For example, employees had to create success, be extraordinarily caring, remarkable, able to collaborate, work quickly, produce results and make a genuine difference in the lives of others. This is perhaps why the more critical counterstories only emerged during intimate storytelling events. Addressing a variety of interesting issues, the analysis also poses many important questions that can be further explored, for instance: What happens when you are constantly being told that you are a ‘remarkable’ employee, employed by an ‘amazing’ organization? What if you do not feel the rush of success? Is there room for being ordinary or not doing the job quite well enough? Or does this lead to stories of personal failure and alienation?

Similar to Pedersen and Johansen’s (2012) results, there is an interesting aspect of personal polyphony at the employee level of the organization to be investigated further. Members of the case organization did not restrain themselves to telling only one type of story. The active voices sharing many success stories on the company intranet were sometimes as eagerly active in telling critical counterstories during intimate storytelling occasions. In addition, the analysis of the interview material revealed many expressions of personal polyphony, even within a single storytelling performance. Many different considerations are always present in the construction of self, work and the organization. The antenarrative approach makes room to explore the tensions and discontinuities of story work. By moving the focus from how stories create coherence and causality, it becomes possible to study how consultants in their story work handle contradictions and tensions and balance many different organizational storylines at the same time.

The analysis of different types of work stories has proven to be an extremely fruitful source of empirical material in the study of such matters, as has the combination of narrative interview and ethnographic studies of everyday life in and around the organization. As Linde (2009) and her colleagues experienced, it was only after spending some time at the company that the noisy silences of the organization began to appear and relating the stories performed in the interviews to other organizational storytelling practices would not have been possible without conducting ethnographic field work. This study calls for further research on the relationship between identity, memories, nostalgia and storytelling, and, more specifically, for a further exploration of the web of storytelling episodes that form narrative memory systems and address questions concerning identity issues across time and space.

This study raises and addresses several interesting issues relevant to managers and other practitioners with an interest in matters of organizational identity, storytelling and of how employees relate to their everyday work and the organization. First, as pointed out by other researchers (Brown, 2006; Linde, 2009), membership in a work organization is a form of voluntary institutional membership that is always open for consideration and renegotiation. The present study provides additional knowledge by showing the dynamic and moment-to-moment nature of such negotiations. Work practice stories of self, work and the organization are dynamic and collectively constructed in ongoing sensemaking processes and storytelling practices in and around organizations.

Finally, on a more practical level, I propose that managers and others interested in matters such as employee retention and employee development can benefit from taking the ongoing narrative sensemaking and matters of both personal and organizational polyphony into consideration. Taking the implications of a dynamic and polyphonic understanding of the interplay between individual and organizational identity construction processes seriously means that capturing or describing how employees feel about their work or the organization is not impossible. Instead of trying to monolithically control organizational identity dialogs or to illuminate critical counterstories, I propose that managers should engage actively in these dialogs, also the less pleasant ones, in order to leave room for the multiple and dissonant voices of the organization. On a more individual level, I propose that working with matters of employee retention and employee development can benefit from considering matters of personal polyphony. By openly allowing and encouraging employees to express ambivalent and polyphonic opinions about their work, management and the organization, the counterstory themes may be matters of shared concern and not noisy, unaddressed silences criticizing management.

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