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Listening to the material life in discursive practices

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to improve our understanding of how discursive practices are related to the sense of reality and materiality. It does not present ways of filling absences in storied fragmented and polyphonic lives, but rather offers a methodology of listening to what people say and do not say. It suggests the use of a multilayered theoretical framework only to listen to what is supposedly lived and experienced in discursive practices. The work produced by the researcher relies partly on what people do not say, and the researchers' interpretative criteria of discursive practices in the material realm involve challenging normality and hegemonic discourses. There are implications for organizational storytelling. The paper suggests that the reader can become aware of material contextual structures in storytelling by taking consideration of the influences of the sense of reality of material discursive practices in the theory of storytelling, as well as the perceived value and risks in its use.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is an understanding of discursive practices by listening to the lived experiences in time and space of material contextual structures in people's accounts, and thereby improve our understanding. This paper does not present ways of filling absences in storied fragmented and polyphonic lives, but rather presents ways of listening to what people say and do not say. Following the work of Smith (1987), Plummer (1995) and Derrida (1978) the researcher may listen to what people do not say, but which a multilayered and integrated framework of theories of material contextual conditions can explore.

The first section presents a discussion of how discursive practices are related to the sense of reality and materiality. It is followed by two sections with other perspectives: one on sensemaking and other on structures and contextualization. These arguments enable the presentation of a definition of materiality for the theory of storytelling. The paper continues with an exploration of ways of listening to the experienced material life in discursive practices. Finally, the paper concludes with the implications for the theory of organizational storytelling.

Discursive practices in the material realm

This section explains how storytelling makes sense of reality; it begins by presenting the relationship between discursive practices and materiality. Boje (2008) introduced the concept of storytelling in organizations, which relates to how people and organizations make sense of the world via narrative and story (discursive practices). Following Boje's concept of organizational discursive practices, these refer to "material practices of text and talk set in currents of political economy and socio history – in time and space" (Boje et al., 2004: 571). It is by focusing mainly on language and conversational organization discourse as both epistemological and ontological knowing that Boje et al. (2004) argue these are material practices of talking, inscribed practices of talking, and inscribed texts. Moreover, discursive practices are contextual. For example, for the authors, the challenging relationship between theory and research involves ascertaining and tracing the dialogue across fragmented discourses from the local into the situated social, historical, and economic contexts.

Boje et al. (2004) view discourse as "the intermingled play of differences in meanings mediated through socially constructed language practices (some of which are hegemonic), especially in genres of verbal utterances such as stories and conversations, as well as in material inscriptions in other texts" (572). Such sense of reality is material. In sum, for Boje et al., materiality, objects, events, and experiences become discursive practices of talking or are inscribed in texts with multiple interpretations within situated socioeconomic contexts embedded in history.

Discursive practices and sensemaking

There are other ethnomethodological variations that emphasize the social production of a sense of reality (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). For example, Karl Weick (1995) sees sensemaking as a process in which everyone engages in normal life and from which people develop a set of ideas with explanatory possibilities. This sensemaking arises from contextualized actions and is grounded in identity work.

Boje (2008) stresses Weick's (1995) work in the retrospective sensemaking of experiences and narrative plots of coherence and control. Boje clearly distinguishes between narratives and stories in storytelling: "Narratives shape our past events into experience using coherence to achieve believability. Stories are more about dispersion of events in the present or anticipated to be achievable in the future" (4). Nevertheless, Boje (2008) claims that it is through the process of sensemaking that people's stories and current experiences integrate past meaning structures. The author believes that the combination of control narrative and emergent story perspectives is an innovative way of thinking that is compatible with phenomenal complexity theory. Boje (2008) advocates an emphasis on "the variety making and fragmenting aspects of story as people seek to transform their current experience into meaning structures that maybe new. Yet, as we have explored, with variety making and sensemaking, there is still control" (233). For Boje, in the narrative of sensemaking, the challenge is to understand the narrative resulting from the control of individuals' stories.

Meaningful structures

The process of making meaningful structures in discursive practices is replete with interpretive difficulties due to contextual conventions. Just as people tend to interpret others' ways of acting in accordance with to their own conventions, in organizations employees tend to interpret the meaning of organizational practices according to the contextual knowledge that is available to them. Interpreting the sense of reality of contextual structures is viewed in a different ways. For example, Goodwin (2000) explored how language and material, two separate academic fields, are contextually configured. For Goodwin (2000), context is a temporally described process that follows rearrangements of structure in talk, participants' bodies, artifacts, spaces, and aspects of the material surroundings. Adding to this point, Goodwin (2000) uses the term *action* to understand the process of contextual configuration seen as semiotic fields, juxtaposed in a way that enables them to mutually elaborate on each other: "A particular, locally relevant array of semiotic fields that participants demonstrably orient to (not simply a hypothetical set of fields that an analyst might impose to code context) is called a *contextual configuration*" (Goodwin, 2000: 1490). These rearrangements of contextual configurations are for the author, social processes embedded within a historically shaped material world, specifically bodies, artifacts, spaces, and aspects of the material surroundings. The implication is that our contextual configuration is an individual one (Habermas 1971) depending upon our experiences.

Other theories cover contextual structures to make sense of reality through a reflexive relationship between action and unequal social structures, such as, for example, the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens (1984). These theories go beyond organizations in an effort to provide a perspective on social reality across multilevel analysis while also providing conceptual links. In contrast to the previous perspective from Goodwin

(2000), these authors include neglected areas of social inequalities such as power distribution. Following this concept, for example, Mayrhofer et al. (2007) sees reality as being that the “real” elements are formed into a unique picture by ordering the elements in a specific way. Thus, reality is reconstructed. In other words, contextual knowledge is transmitted among individuals and societies through various ordered ways.

Material life

Following from this discussion of discursive practices, sense of reality and materiality and how it is interrelated with other perspectives on sensemaking and on structures and contextualization, a definition of material life is proposed.

Material life is a lived experience of (discursive practices) material contextual structures in time and space.

A lived experience is material and at the same time has aspects of permanence and temporality. The concept of permanence and temporality is promoted by Scollon and Scollon (2003), who suggested the geosemiotic perspective. The authors explored the social meaning of the material placements of signs and discourse and of our actions in the material world. The study of *discourses in place* as argued by these authors assigns to materiality permanence or durability, temporality or newness, and quality. The aspect of permanence and temporality in materiality is relevant for a contextual structural perspective, particularly when materiality is connected with socioeconomic contextual structures.

In agreement with Boje (2008), “we do not recover whole accounts. Not usually. We cannot recover whole stories, if mostly they never existed” (242). If there is the possibility that stories can never be recovered or even never existed, but a sense of reality with temporal or permanent characteristics can be given to the story then a lived experience is real and material to the person concerned.

In the next section, ways of listening to the material life, presents three perspectives of understanding a lived experience of discursive practices.

Ways of listening to the material life in discursive practices

There have been suggestions that it is possible to recover the whole story of fragmented account and attempts have been made. Thus for example there have been studies of the intertextuality of living stories by O’Conner (2002); and other theories claiming juxtaposition of a living story to the background of a past story that has not been told (see Boje, 2008). The perspectives adopted here however derive from the work of Smith (1987), Plummer (1995) and Derrida (1978).

It is not intended to present ways of filling absences in storied fragmented and polyphonic lives; rather, it is intended to present ways of listening to the material contextual structures in people’s accounts. As Boje (2008) suggests, studying a story

“requires attending to the authors, beholders (readers), characters, and directors of living and dead story production, distribution and consumption. Living story research sorts out the variety of story practices of various people distributed in places and times” (Boje, 2008:242).

In other words the process of listening to the material life in discursive practices involves the relationship between the author of the story, the potential reader, and the researcher who will analyze the story for production, distribution, and consumption in place and time.

The work of Smith (1987) and Plummer (1995), support the view that it is possible to give material life to a lived experience of discursive practices. These authors suggest a sensitive device that can be used to listen to the contextual conditions that they consider are in people’s accounts. The work of Smith (1987) primarily focuses on what lies behind the individuals’ common sense, whereas Plummer (1995) presents an emancipator analysis: by this he means an informal freedom from inhibition and contextual conventions. Therefore, it is posited that the researcher may relate what is represented and taken for granted in people’s accounts to the researcher’s own awareness of what is not said.

Smith (1987) suggests that “beyond the encounter on the common ground of an everyday world, we have shown dimly the working of another level of organization. Individuals’ accounts of their experience may disclose a level of organization beyond the experience” (128). Smith proposes an analysis of the everyday world as problematic and addresses what lies behind our common understanding; this is of course a leap to the “real” that the researcher may therefore explore. On the other hand Plummer (1995) proposes an analysis of the stories of people that produces historical conditions. This analysis is relevant in this paper to explain the contextual conditions of stories in time and space. It is argued that that stories “[...] are not simply ‘language’ or ‘texts’ or even ‘discourses’ [...] Some of these stories are screamed aloud in intense rage; some are clouded in bitterly tearful silence; others are quietly told to a researcher with a tape recorder” (Plummer: 16).

The background for the idea that there is something not said – that is absent – in discursive practice was first developed in the late 1960s, with the emergence of the poststructuralists (and particularly Kristeva and Derrida), who claimed that the task of a critic is to recognize slippages of meaning and to read the text against itself. Derrida's deconstruction of a text is neither a method nor a process of seeking the "true meaning" or unity; rather, he suggests that it is a process that reveals multiple meanings in conflict with each other. Indeed he claims that one element in any binary opposition is always privileged over the other, and that what this produces is social and cultural hierarchies (e.g., presence-absence). As Laclan (1990: 33) states "Derrida has shown how an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles [...]" Thus the door was opened to opportunities for the analysis of discursive practices within the text.

The ordinary reader of a text is involved in an active process, which may preclude an awareness of a complex and non-chosen involvement. Following Derrida (1978), "The conscious of having something to say as the consciousness of nothing: this is not the poorest, but the most oppressed of consciousness" (8).

Applying this concept to an account of a lived experience of discursive practices, the challenge therefore is in understanding the fragments and in exploring what is the most conscious said (present) as well as the most oppressed of consciousness (not present). The same process of interpretation can be applied to the textual reading of the material life in discursive practices. People's accounts provide information on how they see their world of "things" (material life).

The position of researcher vis-à-vis people's accounts involves exploring fragmented aspects of story in what they say (including silences, absences, and juxtapositions). In other words, the researcher listens to these fragmenting aspects by attending to what people say materially and contextually (present discursive practices) and do not say (non present discursive practices).

In other words, the researcher listens to these fragmenting aspects by attending to what people say and do not say. In this way, researchers uncover the world of "things" that storytellers do not say or see, but that a theoretical framework of contextual conditions can reveal. Such a focus can also reveal organizational discursive practices because people, as practitioners in work organizations, construct systems of fragments—"signs," "ideologies," or "things,"—that they do not intend or see. This is the situation when the storyteller becomes a narrator and tries to make sense of the story embedded in his/her identity and within the local context. In this case, the researcher has to explore the multilayered perspectives and how they are ordered. This perspective allows the reader to take into account the diversity of contextual conditions regarding patriarchy, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and so on.

After the exploration of a multilayered perspective, the researcher can interpret the imaginary meaning of the text in relation to the ways in which people manage their stories. In this way, the researcher's interpretation of people's accounts (lived experience of discursive practices) clarifies the findings related to material contextual conditions. Indeed the interpretation of the imaginary meaning can be supported by the several theories on sensemaking and structuration which have been discussed earlier in the paper. Nevertheless, the researcher can never close and control the narrative has been produced. As Boje (2008) suggested for the narrative of sensemaking, the challenge is to understand the narrative resulting from the control of individuals' stories.

Meaning is of course not transparent in what people say. It must be interpreted from their sets of accounts, silences, juxtapositions, and also their behaviors. In this way, ultimately, storytelling becomes a survival tool of expression of lived experiences of discursive practices that brings recognition to storytellers, who are "always in the middle of living their storied, non-linear, fragmented, and polyphonic lives" (Boje, 2001: 5). In order to illustrate the argument which has been made therefore I present the example of an analysis of fragmented account, extracted from a larger qualitative study about the management of the private sphere of managers (see Reis 2004).

From the perspective of the manager in the following account, to speak about the private sphere in the workplace or with colleagues is to open up a secret issue. Nobody else is supposed to know how one manages the private side. When asked "Did you ever talk with your colleagues from work about any of your domestic issues?" this manager responded:

Yes but not to a great extent, because (pause) it is not easy. When you try to make the decisions for yourself you cannot really talk about it with your colleagues from work, because colleagues from work are not supposed to know what is going on in your mind. If there is an opportunity, as far as work is concerned, it is very difficult to reflect with colleagues from work about what I should do and what I should leave because it goes against the corporate culture.

Within corporate culture, the private sphere is one's own affair and individual responsibility. This manager makes clear that private decisions are not related to his work as a manager. The private side of a career in management is regarded as irrelevant for the company and a trivial issue. For managers, it is a hidden and silent but important personal matter; the material contextual practices in the private sphere remain unspoken because this private life is out of the "public eye," excluded from public discussions within the organization and society. Moreover it could threaten the position and authority of the manager and is therefore not worth talking about.

This perspective allows the reader to become aware of the presence of a certain social order, which is at the same time absent at work in management. The author links the meanings put forward and people's understandings to the social process and structures that create and maintain them as "employees" in organizations. This methodological approach aims to clarify their views and not filling absences in storied fragmented and polyphonic lives; rather, it presents ways of listening to a lived experience of the material contextual structures in people's accounts.

Implications for organizational storytelling and concluding remarks

On the basis of the previous arguments, two main implications are apparent in relation to the theory of organizational storytelling. These are firstly that theory of organizational storytelling would benefit from an analysis that can interpret the imaginary meaning through an integrated multilayered framework of theories (with different perspectives), since this will influence the sense of reality of material discursive practices.

Most authors would agree that in order to make sense of reality, the researcher needs theories that are either implicit or explicit (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). This paper suggests the use of these theories only to listen to what is supposedly lived and experienced in discursive practices and suggests how the reader can become aware of material contextual structures in storytelling. By no means does this proposed process imply that the researcher should put an end to the interpretation of discursive practices; but rather suggests practical outcomes (which can be challenged in turn).

Second, the extent of using a multilayered theoretical framework influences the sense of reality of material discursive practices in the theory of storytelling, as well as the perceived value and risks in its use for organizational storytelling.

Following Derrida's (1978) concept, the challenge lies in understanding a fragmented account by exploring the most conscious said (present) as well as the most oppressed of consciousness (not present). In the light of a multilayered and ontological integrated theoretical framework, the researcher's perceived risk in exploring the most oppressed of consciousness (not present) for organizational storytelling is reduced, since the task of the researcher is to inform and eventually to inflame engagement related to organizational change. The work produced by the researcher relies partly on what people do not say, and the researchers' interpretative criteria of discursive practices in the material realm involve challenging normality and hegemonic discourses. This perspective contributes to storytelling, since it allows the reader to obtain greater awareness of the diversity in people's experienced lives and of the material contextual conditions in their stories.

It is argued that these implications will offer a new outlet for research in the analysis of discursive practices with the theory of storytelling.

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