NARRATIVE (STORY) THEORY

Storytelling theory is defined as the interplay of narrative-past, living-story-present, and antenarrative-futures. The theory's central management insight is that linear narratives are in interplay with other forms of storytelling, such as living stories and antenarratives. Since humans are *homo narrens* (storytelling animals), storytelling is one of the preferred sensemaking currencies of management and organizations. Narrative is typically about the past, often has a linear plot about the past (aka, narrative arc) with a beginning, middle, and end, and comprised of only a few key events and characters in order to provide coherent meaning. Aristotle held that narrative had certain elements: plot, character, theme, dialog, rhythm, and spectacle (in a hierarchic order). Narrative is also a way people and organizations craft their identities. Narratives negotiate order and change. Narrative phenomena occur at the individual, group, organization, community, regional, national, and global levels. Most authors make a distinction between narrative and living stories of the present, and the future-oriented antenarratives.

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(FUNDAMENTALS)

The theory of narrative has undergone many changes since Aristotle's *Poetic* elements. Marx's Historical Materialism was a dialectic approach favoring social class and economic forces. Marx rejected Hegel's narrative of a dialectic of spirit-qua-perception/cognition. US and French Structuralisms searched for form rather than elements or dialectics. Structuralists, such as Burke, were critical of dialectical approached, and reduced Aristotle's six narrative elements to five elements (Pentad) by combining dialogue and rhythm, and changing the names of the elements: plot became act, character became actor, theme became purpose, dialogue and rhythm were combined into agency, and spectacle become scene. In addition scene took on much more important role than in Aristotle's day, and the Pentad was less hierarchical, allowing for combinations, such as act/scene and other ratios. Russian Formalists began with a mechanistic split between narrative-plot (sjuzhet), and story (fabula). The mechanistic view was that narrative could change the plot sequence around, but story had to conform to chronology. Later Russian Formalist looked at poetic aspect as more important than the practical language of narrative and story. Critical theory scholars, such as Bakhtin addressed more dialogical aspects of story (e.g. polyphonic manner of story), in their relationship to the more monologic manner of narrative. Derrida makes a similar differentiation. He looked at how different kinds of narratives (e.g. adventure) have different conceptions of time and space than more folkloric narratives, some of them

emphasizing the more primordial. Poststructuralists (Derrida, Kristeva, etc.) focused on text and intertextuality, or emphasized discourse (Foucault, Butler, and many others). Hermeneutic approaches (particularly, Ricoeur) looked across iterative temporal events at how pre-narrative (e.g. story), narrative (emplotment), and post-narrative discourse formed a hermeneutic circle (or spiral. Ricoeur also returns to a dialectic of difference and sameness in identity narratives. Social constructionism began with a focus on the relation of materiality to narrative (& discourse) constructions (e.g. Berger & Luckmann). In recent years social constructionism has been criticized for taking the linguistic turn too far, and leaving out material conditions, and materiality itself (see. Barad, Latour, and others).

There are several types of narrative (grand, counter-narrative, antenarrative, etc.). The grand narrative is more macro in orientation, such as a grand narrative about Marxism, liberal democracy, etc. There are counter-narratives about a dominant narrative rendition of events, and accounts by other narrators. Narrative can also be more micro, such as the narrative of one's career. Narratives about the future or ones that are not as yet entirely coherent or stabilized are referred to as antenarratives. According to the theory of organizational narrative, it adapts slowly to circumstance, and is what Czarniawska, 'petrified' in order to stabilize core values, rooted in the past. Mumby asserts that narratives can be quite political, and hegemonic.

Narrative and Story

For those who distinguish between narrative and story, narrative often empties out or abbreviates story. The Italian approach is microstoria, a look at the stories and tellers who defy the grand narrative order of their community. This is often done with archival data. Gabriel in organization studies views story as something more than narrative, such as something that is performative, and has emotional carriage. People tell narratives of the past, and living stories of their unfolding relationships (that may have neither identifiable beginnings nor foreseeable endings), as well as what some authors call, antenarratives of the future. Such antenarratives are import to strategy, to leader visioning, and so forth. Living stories and antenarratives by contrast adapt and morph more readily. The three aspects of storytelling (narrative, story, & antenarrative) are in co-adaptive relationships.

Narrative, story, and antenarrative are studied in their own right or used to substantiate other concepts such as efficacy, identity, agency, rhetoric, ethics, motivation, politics, complexity, (explicit/tacit) knowledge, learning, etc.

Work in narrative is focused on their relationship to discourse (i.e. narrative as a domain of discourse). Emotional contagion, intuition, and unconscious are being related to narrative. Recent approaches are looking at moving from *homo narrens* to *species narrens,* or even *material narrens.* This is a more posthumanist perspective, where humans are not the only species doing the storytelling, and from a forensic or archaeological perspective, the materiality tells its own story. Actor-network-theory and agential-realism (Barad) looks at this later perspective.

In conclusion, the practical applications of storytelling theory are that an organization's storytelling needs to balance its past, present, and future. Modern managers can learn from this theory how a linear and petrified sense-making narrative of the past can provide stability in stable equilibrium situations, but when the environment changes to fare from equilibrium, there can be a need to look non-linear, and non-cyclical antenarrative paths of transformation to the future. The spiral-antenarratives of how an organization can have upward ascents and downward plunges in its performance in its complexity and strategic flexibility. The storytelling can get out of sync with complex adaptive systems in more turbulent environments. We are just beginning to study and understand spiral- and assemblage-antenarratives because narrative (story) theory for the longest time has focused on the past, instead of the future.

-- David M. Boje

See also: Actor network theory, appreciative inquiry, punctuated equilibrium model of organizational transformation, sense-making, strategic flexibility, tacit knowledge

Further Readings:

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7. Vaara, E., & Tienari, J. (2011). On the narrative construction of multinational corporations: An antenarrative analysis of legitimation and resistance in a cross-border merger. Organization Science, Vol. 22 (2): 370-390.