

Storytelling of how the past, present and future collide in M & A becoming

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, Bojean storytelling, Bakhtin's concept of space-time; as well as Martin Heidegger's 'Being-in-the world' ontology are utilized to decipher the link between pre and post-acquisition processes in the sensemaking of managers while they are doing M&A 'in-the-making'. This is done as a response to calls by extant scholars for a more holistic approach to M & A research as well as calls for more attention to the role of time in organization and management theory. The aim of the paper is to generate insights into the process of M&A becoming- the mechanisms underlying the arrival of acquisition outcomes. These insights will be generated using an ante narrative fore-caring enquiry into the M&A process. Antenarratives are fragmented, nonlinear stories which have not yet been petrified into narratives, but rather pieces of organizational discourse which can help to confirm a line of reasoning. By exploring antenarratives of key events of the pre and post-acquisition phases, this research will facilitate a better understanding of how the past, present and future collide in strategic practices the storytelling organization.

Keywords: Storytelling, antenarratives, M&A, dialogism, temporality

INTRODUCTION

How do acquiring managers make sense of the acquisition process? The first argument of this paper is that there is need for a more holistic 'process' approach to M&A research. This approach which will bring together the flow/flux across both the pre and post-acquisition phases may be more beneficial for understanding how the fragmented narratives (antenarratives) of the M&A process generate grand narratives or counternarratives of M&A outcomes. Stopping short at either the choice perspective (pre-acquisition) or the integration process/implementation phase (post-acquisition) during the enquiry is an unrealistic approach to how M&A occurs in the real world. M&A 'process' researchers have focused more on the post-acquisition integration phase (e.g. Birkinshaw, et al., 2000; Zollo & Singh, 2004); this does not help to facilitate a pre-understanding of the underlying prejudices or interpretations which drive actual or emergent strategy during the acquisition phase which will invariably

lead to outcomes. Consequently, the post-acquisition process cannot be fully grasped without unbundling the pre-acquisition phase. The pre-acquisition phase can be said to function as a reflected understanding, becoming part of an acquirer's historical or cultural background (Svane & Boje, 2014). This serves as a fore-structure and fore-conception (Heidegger, 1962) of understanding the post-acquisition process. Thus, on the one hand, the pre-acquisition phase can bring about a pre-understanding or familiarity which provides a guide for post-acquisition strategy in the process of M&A becoming. Balanced against this, it may act as a sort of pre-judice that may distort how acquirers interpret the post-merger integration (PMI) experience (Svane & Boje, 2014).

Secondly, although extant researchers have provided important insights into the role of time in organizations (Bluedorn & Denhardt, 1988; Chandler & Foster, 2015), there is a lack of understanding of how exactly the future, and consequently the past and present are constructed in strategizing (Vaara & Pedersen, 2014). Without understanding the role of time, it is not possible to fully understand how antenarratives and/or fully formed narratives may enable sense making (Boje, et al., 2016; Vaara & Pedersen, 2014). Two concepts of time have been identified by Ricceur (1988); cosmic/chronological (time of the world) and phenomenological (time of our lives). He posits that cosmic time can become phenomenological to the extent that it is articulated in a narrative mode; and narrative attains full significance when it becomes a condition of temporal existence (Vaara & Pedersen, 2014). This narrative/ phenomenological time is experienced in terms of the past, present and future. This perspective of time is quite important for M&A strategy research because future "goals, visions, dreams and other constructions define time by the events, goals and targets that are set for the future and by references to the future or the past" (p.596). This is a combination of both chronological and phenomenological time.

In the context of M&A process research, the acquiring managers make sense of the acquisition experience through major events during the acquisition process (e.g. non-binding offer, due-diligence, post-merger integration). Therefore exploring the M&A process by extracting antenarratives from acquiring managers surrounding these events is crucial to understanding how the M&A future may be arrived at. This is in line with suggestions by Van de Ven, et al., (1989) that without observing a change process from a manager's perspective, it becomes difficult (if not impossible) for an investigator to understand the dynamics confronting managers who are involved in a strategic change effort, and thereby generate new knowledge that advances the theory and practice of strategy process.

ANTENARRATIVE FORE-CARING ENQUIRY INTO THE M & A PROCESS

Being-in-the-world in a sense of fore-caring and concern is to be authentically aware in being, in dwelling and in knowing by experience (Heidegger, 1962; Svane & Boje, 2014). Fore-caring, as caring for self, for others, for the relationship, for futures, for potentiality and for destiny is the approach of the storytelling inquiry by Boje. Fore-caring and inquiry is related to Heidegger's (1962, 2008) anticipatory resoluteness and explication of attunements (or moods). According to Heidegger, our attunements manifest in how we are faring in the world of becoming. Consequently, due to our fore-caring-attunement, some futures may become more attractive than others. We are in the world by moods prior to cognition and we are attending to the world from this inner state-of-mind (Shotter, 2011). Thus the internal processes of our body entangle with the processes of the material world in an inseparable structure of intra-actions (Barad 2003,2007). The movement of feelings arise as part of what Shotter describes as "our outgoing exploratory activities and their incoming results (Shotter, 2011, p. 10).

Finally, fore-caring is an attunement to the future, and a way to reinterpret the past, and engage in present actions to collapse a choice particular futures into becoming present. It relates to the imaginary dimensions and fostering various forms of socioeconomic as well as political activity to bring it about (Picard et al., 2015). Fore-caring is a percept of the future, but not retrospective through the lens of the past as in Gioia, Corley, and Fabbri (2002), or Weick's (1995) retrospective sensemaking. Fore-caring is prospective, anticipatory caring for future generations.

Anticipation is a way by which acquirers look forward to possible outcomes, whereas one of the most authentic modes of caring is anticipatory resoluteness; a caring where being is "ahead of itself" grounded in the future (Barad, 2007: p.375). It relates to taking ownership of one's life by "taking action" and by being an authentic self. Therefore, an authentic self does not simply repeat the usual doings despite cultural familiarity. This is opposed to the inauthentic or "they-self" which is the absorption of self into the world where 'they' prescribes the way of interpreting the world by articulating the referential context of significance (Heidegger, 2008, p. 167). Consequently, the antenarrative fore-caring enquiry of the M&A process will facilitate a better understanding of how acquirer's may attune in new ways towards choices and actions in their approach to the manifold of future M & A outcomes. The ante narrative model relates to the circle of understanding of knowing-in-

being-in-becoming. Interpretation is founded on fore-having, fore-conception and fore-sight (Heidegger 2008: 191). These three concepts are linked to the practical understanding of being involved in the world.

Life-in-process-of-becoming is deeply entangled with the interaction with others, things and events in time, space and culture. Therefore polyphonic, dialogues (Bakhtin 1981, 1984) allow therefore living stories of life-worlds to merge culturally, socially and historically and produce new multi-voiced, merged living stories as well as new language and relationship practices. Strategic narratives have been said to be ‘polyphonic’ (Bakhtin, 1984); where polyphony refers to the author’s position in a text (Barry & Elmes, 1997). In polyphonic discourse, the researcher takes a less ‘authoritative’ role; a dialogic rather than that mono-logic perspective is encouraged in which different logics not only co-exist but also inform and shape one another (Bakhtin, 1984). This form-shaping ideology demands that the author ceases to exercise mono-logic control (Morson & Emerson, 1990). Consequently, polyphony demands work in which several consciousnesses meet as equals and engage in a dialogue that in principle is unfinalizable (Morson & Emerson, 1990). Additionally, based on the expectations to other’s future reactions to an utterance, the dialogue also draws on voices from the future. A dialogic process of storytelling involves nonlinear time where the past and the future can collide in the present. This interplay is important because narratives relying on past experiences and resources may miss out on current developments. Likewise, narratives that are constructed solely on unforeseen events fail to motivate or to inspire for future resources, whilst ignoring learning (Haley & Boje, 2014).

Developing on this insight, and on the understanding that strategy narratives have to be linked to the conditions of their production (Vaara & Pedersen, 2014); the analysis seeks to utilise the fragmented stories told by respondents surrounding key acquisition events (identified by respondents) to explore the mechanisms underlying acquisition outcomes. It identifies fore-caring, as an ethics of care; which involves antecedent process steps implemented, where before, between, beneath, bets, and so on take place This preparation can enable acquiring organizations to work towards the outcomes they desire.

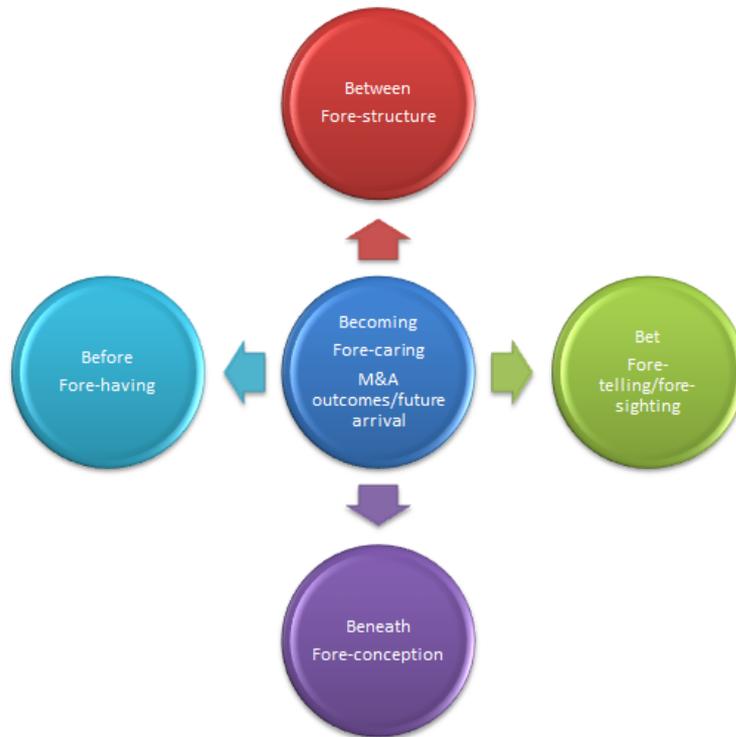
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Similar to the approach undertaken by Boje et al., (2016), this research captures fragmented, pre-narrative speculations of the pre-acquisition and post-acquisition phases which are

analysed in context. This provides a framework to highlight the linkages and iterativeness of these two processes and also reveal divergent internal voices during the pre-merger phase which may never emerge in the post-acquisition narratives but which nonetheless exist and may influence sense making and how managers interpret PMI outcomes. This research views stakeholders' fragmented stories (antenarratives) as underlying constructs in organizational narratives (Pentland, 1999). At any point in time, alternative and competing antenarratives exist, sometimes in dialogical relationships, explaining and propelling strategic change (Czarniawska, 2004). Hence, it is proposed that for more effective strategizing, acquiring managers routinely connect between pre and post-acquisition processes competing antenarratives to link living stories grounded in particulars with grand narratives of general trends. Therefore the acquisition process is viewed as 'becoming' (Carlsen, 2006), occurring in tandem with authoring pre and post-acquisition phase strategies, and emphasizing movement, flux and emergence. Simultaneously, pre-acquisition antenarratives augment and amend managerial narratives that may or may not eventually become institutionalized in the grand narrative (plan) of the post-acquisition phase (Boje, 1991, 1995).

The core of Boje's antenarrative model relates to Heidegger's notion of a world of care (Boje, 2014). Following Heidegger (1962), being-open in being-with presupposes the fore-caring and inquiring way of being-in-the-world according to which Dasein is caring for self, for others, for the relationship, for futures of potentiality and for the destiny (Boje, et al., 2015). The four "bubbles" of the model relates to Heidegger's distinction between practical understanding and interpretation. In fore-caring, there is an ethics of care. It can be rushed over, and little fore-caring happens. Or, there can be antecedent process steps implemented, where before, between, beneath, bets, and so on take place so that there is not a rush into event, rather there is preparation in acts of fore-caring. This preparation can enable acquiring organizations to work towards the outcomes they desire.

Antenarrative is defined as the "field of forces before, between, beneath, bets and becoming that occur in the reduction of diverse living stories to hegemonic narratives and counter-narratives" (Svane, et al., 2015). Antenarratives are fragments of discourse that are articulated to make sense of things or to give sense to them in chaos of organizational presence. This means that rather than focusing on traditional narrative analysis of relatively salient structures, plots and actants, one should zoom in on the fragmented. An ante-narrative approach is a fruitful perspective for this study because narratives of M&A's are rarely coherent stories (Vaara & Tienari, 2011).



Adapted from Boje (2014)

1. Before (fore-having):

The antenarrative is the process of storytelling 'before' the narrative coheres; it collapses the many possible futures (bets) into a few actualities (Boje, 2014). Any assertion requires a fore-having of whatever has been disclosed and this is what it points out by way of giving something a definite character (Heidegger, 1962, p. 157). This is something we have in advance, something that is already understood. This called the "hermeneutical Situation"... "to bring into the scope of our fore-having, with which all subsequent steps of our analysis are to conform" ... "to be brought into the fore-having" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 232).

Taking actions, we path the way for a more potential and attractive future. Acting upon it is a way of fore-having it. Taking action is a process by knowing and knowing emerging in the entanglement between the body and the material world in a dance between

what is intelligible and what is not (Svane, 2014). It is a way of preparing for the potential becoming of the future/ shaping the future (Boje, 2014).

2. Between (fore-structure):

The ante-narrative serves as a bridge or link between living story web and the grand (counter) narrative of generality, universality and essentialism (Boje, 2014; Svane, 2014). As a bridge, they are in the centre of the interplay between, at the one hand, the narratives of the organization in place that are rooted in collective stuck-in-the past memories and, at the other hand, emerging living stories of “life-in-the- process-of becoming” (Bakhtin, 2010; Boje, 2011). As stated by Heidegger, “all interpretation operates in the fore-structure, which we have already characterized” (Heidegger, 2008, p. 194). Hence the fore-structure encompasses definitions and prejudices.

3. Bet (fore-telling/fore-sighting):

Fore-telling practices are a way of working with destiny; of making some possible and attractive futures more potential than others and of preventing some other possible futures from happening (Boje, et al., 2015). To anticipate is to fore-sight; the sight of what is coming; a warning signal to be understood, interpreted and acted upon (Boje, 2014). Hence, fore-sighting / fore-telling concerns the bet for the future of the organization. In the encounter is a ready-to-hand, veiled, a covering-up of "readiness-to-hand" and we fore-see this in "Articulating reference-relations" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 158). Something strays from the uniform plane of present-at-hand or some "theoretical assertion" and something moves toward, what Boje (2001, 2008, 2014) calls 'bet on the future, a new potentiality, among a set of potentialities.

As described by Heidegger, the futural mode is an existentials of being as being-towards-possibilities (Heidegger, 2008, p. 188). This implies that by being on the move, being-in-the-world is never in a static state but always on its way to becoming something else (Svane, 2014). Fore-seeing can be short-sighted or farsighted (Heidegger, 1962, p. 316); it challenges past experiences to posit alternative futures and therefore new strategic actions. As the future comes under the influence of past expectations, an inversion occurs of the historical becoming the only possible future. To say that a thing could and in fact must be realized in the future is portrayed as part of the past: (Bakhtin, 1981:147).

Fore-telling or fore-sighting is held in a practical fore-having and not in a cognitively derived prediction as its primordial foundation. This something we see in advance is a fore-sight that “takes the first cut” out of what has been taken into our fore-having, and it does so with a view to a definite way in which this can be interpreted” (Heidegger 2008: 191).

4. Beneath (fore conception):

Fore-conception is related to the beneath part of the antenarrative (Boje, 2014b) that reaches into the grounding of real life at the concrete micro level of the organization (Svane, 2014). The grand narrative consists of pre-defined concepts and already interpreted, thematic and scientific knowledge at an aggregated, generalized, and abstract level of the organization. According to Heidegger, however, the most primordial kind of knowing is the one grounded in our actions and not in our cognition. Taking action on possibilities is not rooted in a conscious move where we analyse and take cognizance of the situation (Heidegger 2008: 347); instead actions are already part of the situation as being-in-the-world. Anything understood which is held in our fore-having and towards which we set our sights ‘foresightedly’ becomes conceptualizable through the interpretation- it is grounded in something the grasp in advance- in a fore-conception (Heidegger, 1962, p. 150).

In Heidegger’s thinking, conception in interpretation is grounded in the real life language instead of being derived from the scientific, theoretical and already known world. This performative practice oriented view on language and discourses is reflected in Wittgenstein’s work on language games according to which meanings of words are woven into their activities of their forms of life (Wittgenstein, 2010). The process is thus closely related to the actions of the before or fore-having phase (Svane, 2014).

RESEARCH CONTEXT

Acquirer: Brazilian company (currently worth 30 billion dollars) with employee strength of 10,000. 40% market share in Brazil. Pseudonym Company X.

Acquired firm: Portuguese MNC that is suffering a lot due to European crisis and the subprime crises that happened earlier had 10% market share in Brazil at the time of the acquisition. Acquisition was a ‘carve-out’ where there were two main shareholders; company X (33% shares) and another Brazilian company- company Y (36% shares). Each had six countries each from the parent Portuguese company. Company X stayed with assets in Spain,

Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, India and China (this research focuses more on the Spanish assets).

The story covers the acquisition of Portuguese cement multinational by a Brazilian cement firm. It examines the account of four ‘storytellers’; all of whom were involved in the acquisition process. In line with the dialogic approach (Bakhtin, 1981), the participants from different departments: president of North American operations, procurement, and business development. There were two sources of stories: respondent’s stories, high-level documents used before, during and after. The grand narrative became that the acquisition of the Portuguese firm was a success.

The knowledge of the company is created through a localist approach to interviews (Alvesson, 2003) within the framework of a dialogical post-modern study (Deetz, 2001). This approach emphasizes that knowledge of the company is emerging through communication with the company. Consequently, the interviews occur as a dialogue or conversation during which the researcher and respondents together produce knowledge of the company. The interviews arranged by the researcher were not prepared with pre-formulated questions (as in the traditional way); this is because the researcher was not looking to collect strictly petrified narratives or ‘dead bits of stuff’ (Shotter, 2011, p. 4). Rather, the researcher was looking to collect ‘living stories’ webs- which are not whole, are without beginning or end and just unfolding in the middle (Boje, 2014b). Hence, the questions were instead emerging as a natural part of the conversation; where some were shaped as retrospective sensemaking narrative questions and others as prospective antenarrative questions (Boje, 2014). This knowledge co-created in the here and now of the moment of the conversation is a local, situated knowledge implying that the interview is interpreted in its social context (Alvesson, 2003). Thus, this research was conducted with myself (as researcher) and the respondents jointly co-creating knowledge. The respondents used marriage metaphors to explain their in order to explain their understanding of key acquisition events.