

**NARRATIVES AS SOURCES OF STABILITY AND CHANGE IN  
ORGANIZATIONS: APPROACHES AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE  
RESEARCH**

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**Abstract:** While narrative analysis has made significant advances in organization and management studies, scholars have not yet unleashed its full potential. This review provides an understanding of key issues in narrative analysis with a focus on the role of narratives in organizational stability and change. We elaborate on three key approaches to narrative analysis on stability and change: realist, interpretative and poststructuralist approaches. We then review several key topic areas where narrative analysis has so far offered the most promise: organizational change, identity, strategy, entrepreneurship and personal change. We then identify important issues that warrant attention in future research, both theoretically and methodologically.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Narrative approaches play a key role in the humanities and social sciences (Bakhtin, 1981; Greimas, 1987; Propp, 1968; Ricouer, 1984). They have also become increasingly popular in management and organization studies, something that reflects both their utility and versatility. A large breadth of scholars covering a range of topics that span macro research such as strategy (Barry & Elmes, 1997), meso research such as change (Boje, 1991, Brown, 2003; Sonenshein, 2010; Vaara & Tienari, 2011) and micro work such as personal growth (Maitlis, 2009; Sonenshein et al., 2013) have used aspects of narratives in their research. Some theorists also use narratology – the analysis of the structures, functions, themes, symbols and conventions of narratives – to develop theories of organizations (Czarniawska, 2004; Boje, 2011).

While narratives provide a broad and powerful lens that crosses multiple levels of analysis, we propose that a key unifying theme among this research focuses on the ability of narrative to speak to core issues of stability and change in organizations. As organizational theorists have pointed out (Farjoun, 2010), understanding stability and change is a key dynamic in a wide range of organizational phenomenon (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Nelson & Winter, 1982; Thompson, 1967; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Weick, 1979). We will explain how narratives serve as a valuable device to understand this dynamic. But in order to do this, we first must address the challenges that scholars routinely face when using narrative approaches, particularly around basic definitions, core theoretical concepts, and methodological techniques.

In this paper, we seek to provide a critical review and guide to this potentially intimidating but also incredibly generative body of literature. We focus on the distinctive

features of organizational narratives and aim at clarifying the relationship between multiple perspectives on organizational narratives across various topics areas. We define organizational narratives as temporal, discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, social and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving. While narrative analysis has typically focused on narratives that have a clear beginning and an end, we maintain that organizational narratives are often articulated only in fragments as a part of organizational discourse. Thus, organizational narrative analysis has to go beyond traditional forms of narrative analysis stemming from literary theory or linguistics (Boje, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2007). We maintain that narratives are mobilized in various kinds of ways. This involves intentional storytelling (Boje, 2008). However, narratives are also used and reproduced in many other ways as part of discourses and communication. Rather than focusing on narratives per se, we underscore the need to elaborate on the various ways in which narratives play a part in stability and change in organizations (e.g., Dailey & Browning, 2013; Feldman, 2000).

We start by providing an updated working definition for organizational narratives that can serve as a conceptual basis for studying narratives in organizational contexts. We then elaborate on three approaches that researchers have used in organizational narrative analysis. We group the literature into realist approaches that focus on narrative data (typically of a qualitative nature), interpretive approaches that focus on people's constructions of organizational phenomena, and poststructuralist approaches which focus on deconstruction of dominant narrative representations and narrative emergence. All three streams have an important place in organization studies, but it is important to point to their inherent differences to advance organizational narrative analysis.

We then provide an overview of the role of narratives in stability and change in specific topic areas in management and organization research: organizational change, identity, strategy, entrepreneurship and personal change. We describe how each of these literatures has addressed key issues around stability and change. We finish by outlining an agenda for future research on narratives. In doing so, we encourage the wide range of perspectives in the literature that has allowed it to flourish. However, we also maintain a need to develop a common vernacular to help facilitate the development of narratives research. We offer several conceptual and methodological approaches to moving narratives research in organization studies forward along these lines.

In conclusion, the literature has been both blessed by and plagued with a variety of approaches to narratives research. Our ambition is to take the reader on a guided journey that elucidates the conceptual underpinnings of narratives and finishes with a preview of what a future might look like as scholars work in this exciting domain of research. Indeed, narrative research is a rapidly expanding literature in organization studies. Now is an ideal time to take stock of how the field has developed and outline a vision for its future.

## **A BASIC CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR ORGANIZATIONAL NARRATIVES**

Narrative research involves an interdisciplinary body of literature that spans across the social sciences and humanities. For this reason, using a narrative perspective in organization studies often raises questions such as, “where do I start?” and “which approach do I use?” The epistemological and methodological pluralism provides for a rich body of research but also comes with critical challenges. On the one hand, we need

to have a clear overall understanding what *organizational* narratives are. On the other, there is a need to develop comprehension of specific approaches to narratives with their fundamentally different onto-epistemological assumptions and methodological preferences. We will start with the overall definition in this section followed by a framework detailing three approaches to narratives.

Organizational narratives have at least six key features. First, organizational narratives are temporal, discursive constructions that provide a means for individual, social and organizational sensemaking and sensegiving. They are thus often associated with other language-based perspectives such as organizational discourse (Phillips & Oswick, 2012), rhetoric (Cheney et al., 2004), framing (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014) or vocabularies (Lowenstein, Ocasio & Jones, 2012) without addressing what makes narratives a unique form of discourse. We maintain that it is the temporal aspect of narratives that distinguishes them from other forms of discourse, and that this temporality provides a key way of understanding issues such as stability and change in organizations.

Second, organizational narratives are not often fully-fledged stories or accounts as classical narrative research in literary theory or linguistics assume (Boje, 1991, 2008). The temporal plotlines are not always explicit and can remain implicit in organizational narratives. Thus, narrative analysis in management and organization studies must also comprise fragmented narratives where elements of narrative structures such as the end or the beginning are implicit. Moreover, organizational narratives may often involve ‘proto-narratives’ or ‘antenarratives’ that are elementary forms of narratives that may or may not develop into fully developed storylines (Boje, 2008).

Third, a narrative view requires a focus on the means by which they are produced

and consumed. The terms narrative, account, and story are often used interchangeably. To be clear, we understand stories as existing narratives that can be told and retold in various forms. Accounts are people's own narrative descriptions of organizational processes, events and phenomena. Thus, narration and storytelling are key terms in narrative analysis. Narration is the process in which narratives are told, whereas storytelling is the activity that spreads various kinds of stories in and around organizations (Boje, 2008, 2014). However, we maintain that organizational narratives are often spread without particular intentionality or deliberate action.

Fourth, although we focus on organizational narratives, we emphasize that they are parts of multifaceted structures. At the macro level, one can link organizational narratives with broader societal narratives that reproduce dominant values and ideologies (Lyotard, 1979). Thus, it is important to contextualize organizational narratives to be able to understand their role in stability and change. At the micro level, organizational narratives themselves are composed of discursive and rhetorical elements. These elements are in turn important to understand the spread or appeal of specific narratives.

Fifth, while narratives in management and organization studies are usually associated with language (written or spoken), we maintain that they can also include and relate to other forms of communication and modes (especially visual and audio). This is one of the key challenges that we will come back to in more detail in the future directions part of the paper.

Sixth, narratives play a key function in terms of stability and change in organizations. At one level, for example people's accounts or researchers' narratives provide descriptions of sequences of events, which frame these events as change or

stability. At another level, organizational narratives can also be influential in organizational processes, thereby changing the trajectory of events that unfold, which in turn, changes the organization or reproduces the status quo. In this regard, narratives have performative power and agency.

## **NARRATIVE APPROACHES TO STABILITY AND CHANGE**

We now present and elaborate on three distinctive approaches to organizational narratives: realist, interpretative and poststructuralist approaches. Their main features are summarized in Table 1. Although we wish to highlight the distinctive nature and differences of these approaches, studies sometimes combine elements of different approaches.

Insert Table 1 around here

### **Realist Approaches: Narratives as Representations**

In realist perspectives, narratives are linked with empirical analysis, typically qualitative case studies. This approach resonates with realist or positivistic understandings of organizational phenomena where narratives per se are not in the focus of the analysis but seen as representations of other things (Abbott, 1992; Pentland, 1999). In these studies, narratives are either positioned as a researcher's constructions or interpretations of cases, or as data that forms the basis for qualitative, and at times, quantitative analysis.

**Researchers' narratives.** A first approach focuses on the researcher's construction of the case at hand, and the term narrative alongside similar ones such as 'tale' are used to describe the researcher's construction of the case. One of the most popular uses of this form of narrative occurs in process studies that play a central role in understanding stability and change. For instance, Langley (1999) has focused attention on the

researcher's narrative of organizational processes, and van de Ven and Huber (1990) consider such narratives as key parts of longitudinal research. Burgelman (2011) has explained how longitudinal case studies combine an historical narrative understanding of a case leading to particular generalization with the reductionism of social science aiming at general particularism. Van Maanen (1988) has in turn elaborated on the types of ethnographic tales or narratives that researchers may produce, and distinguished between realist, confessional and impressionist tales where the realist tales are the objective descriptions of events, while the confessional and impressionist tales describe the researchers' own experiences with personal or selective examples. Recently, Jarzabkowski et al. (2014) have provided an interesting analysis of how such narratives are constructed in and through 'textwork.' Textwork here means a focus on the ways in which the researchers' narratives are designed and written, something that Golden-Biddle and Locke (2007) have also addressed.

**Narratives as data.** Narratives have also frequently been used as sources of data to access phenomena that exist independently of the narratives in question. In fact, this use of the term 'narrative' has been widespread. The range of these studies varies from the 'casual' use of the term narrative to refer to interview data to using narratives as a basis of capturing experiences or socio-psychological processes. Such work has also involved postpositivist perspectives on narratives using narrative data as a basis for constructing understanding of cases, their dynamics, and even causality in them. For example, Abbott (1992) has elaborated on the use of narrative material to understand sequences, processes, and dynamics in social phenomena. This has also resonated with attempts to use narrative data, i.e., qualitative data in terms of accounts, to create increasingly accurate



understanding of causality as in Griffin's (1993) event-structure analysis. Stevenson and Greenberg (1998) provide an example of such an analysis. They used event-structure analysis to examine how organizational mobilization led to change in a policy for the use of parks in a small city near Boston. They first constructed a narrative of events "with some causal imagery based on our data sources" (p. 479). Then they analyzed the key events with software such as ETHNO and ESA to distill an event-structure with clearer causal relationships between events and actions. This involved the following steps: auditing (external view on the initial interpretations), insider-outsider perspectives, multiple data sources, identifying important events, counterfactual arguments, and revisiting the data. After iterations, this led to a convergent mapping of the key turning points in the narrative. As a result, they show that such mobilization tends to be less coordinated and more affected by environmental pressures than researchers typically think.

Other studies have often found inspiration in 'narrative inquiry' originating from the work of Polkinghorne (2007), among others. Such studies typically use narratives as a critical component to explain some type of change relevant outcome and usually rely on a positivist epistemology. For example, Sonenshein (2006) captured change agents' narratives to influence others about a change by having working professionals write a memo to either a boss, direct report or co-worker. He compared these public narratives with a private narrative subjects had written beforehand. In comparing the two narratives, he found that the public narrative contained a higher frequency of economic and lower frequency of moral language. Sonenshein and Dholakia (2012) gathered employees' narratives of organizational change, and then related these narratives to change behaviors

which were mediated by psychological resources. They found that two themes in employees' narratives—strategy worldview and benefits finding—created psychological resources that led to more engagement with a strategic change.

Management and organization scholars have also aimed at creating a more systematic understanding of narratives and how they may constitute broader meaning. This is the case for example with Pentland and Feldman (2007) who have suggested a new methodology to study the interlinkages of narratives in narrative networks. Other studies have operationalized narrative data as variables to be as part of quantitative analyses. An illuminating example is provided by Martens et al. (2007) who examined how storytelling impacts a firm's ability to secure capital. They argued that narratives help to establish a comprehensible identity for a firm, to elaborate the logic of entrepreneurial opportunities, and to embed the firm's activities in broader discourses. Their statistical analysis found support for the hypothesized positive effects. Herzenstein et al. (2011) picked up on similar themes, analyzing the identity claims embedded in narratives to influence acquiring loans using crowdfunding.

### **Interpretative Approaches: Narrative Constructions as Objects of Study**

In interpretative approaches, narratives are theorized as people's constructions of organizational phenomena. These approaches typically draw from traditions in literary studies such as Greimasian structural analysis of narratives (Greimas, 1987) or social psychology such as Bruner's (1986) work on how individuals use narratives to socially construct reality for themselves. In organization and management studies, they have frequently been linked with sensemaking as an overall theoretical frame and come in two

primary forms we review below: individual narratives and composite narratives.

**Individual narratives.** Some studies focus on individual accounts or stories and analyze them with narrative methods (Gertsen & Söderberg, 2011; Pedersen, 2009; Czarniawska, 1997, 2004; Gabriel, 2000). Such studies have often drawn from classical narrative frameworks and methods (e.g., Greimas, 1987) to analyze accounts or texts from a narrative perspective. For instance, Gertsen and Söderberg (2011) have analyzed stories of collaboration in a multinational corporation. In their analysis, they focused on two narratives: one of a Danish expatriate manager and another of his Chinese CEO in Shanghai. Their analysis was based on Greimas's (1987) actantial model that allowed them to elaborate on specific turning points and the constructed roles of the key actors in these stories and compare them. This led to a mapping differences between and changes in the narrators' projects, alliances and oppositions in the course of their interaction. This analysis in particular helped to understand how they overcome their differences and established common ground.

Pedersen (2009) provides another kind of example where she focuses on the role of space and time in narratives that deal with change in a hospital context. In her analysis, she unravels a consultant's, a social worker's and a senior nurse's stories with a Bakhtin-inspired focus on chronotopes, i.e., space-time configurations in the narratives. In this analysis, she also makes use of Morson's (1994) ideas about side- and foreshadows as alternative scenarios to the main plots. Sideshadows are alternative versions of how events could unfold, and foreshadows represent constructions of the future. She elaborates on each of the three stories and then discusses their differences.

**Composite narratives.** The bulk of interpretive research, has focused on interpretative

patterns (Polkinghorne, 1988) to build composite narratives that capture the collective meanings of a group of organizational members. Researchers typically put together these composite narratives by collecting narratives from several organizational actors (Dunford & Jones, 2000; Llewellyn, 2001). For example, Currie and Brown (2003) conducted a case study at a hospital and created a narrative not articulated by any one informant but rather formed from fragments from many (see also, Balogun & Johnson, 2004). This provides the opportunity for scholars to examine the polyphony present during change whereby different groups offer unique interpretations of the change unfolding before them as well as try to influence others about these particular meanings.

Sköldberg (1994) provides an early example of such an approach. Based on an analysis of organizational change in Swedish local government organizations, he focused on how the people involved experienced the changes as expressed in their narrative accounts. His analysis showed how people in each of the units could tell different kinds of narratives. This led him to identify and elaborate on three types of narrative modes: tragedy, romantic comedy and satire. On this basis, he argued that narrative conventions and their genres, rather than more substantial concerns, formed the meaning of the changes for the people involved.

Vaara (2002) offers another kind of example of interpretative analysis in his study of success and failure in post-merger organizational change processes. By combining ideas from critical discourse analysis and Greimasian narrative analysis, he distinguished between four types of narrative discourses: rationalistic, cultural, role-bound, and individualistic. These discourses provided different kinds of means for the managers involved to make sense of success/failure, to attribute credit and blame, and to account

for their own responsibility.

Another illuminating study is provided by Sonenshein (2010) who examined the narrative construction of organizational change processes. In his analysis, he drew from Gergen and Gergen's (1987) ideas about different types of narratives and insights from sensemaking research to elaborate on the ways in which the people involved interpreted and responded to strategic change. Based on a number of interviews and other empirical material, he identified progressive, stability and regressive narratives that each provided different means for making sense of and giving sense to the changes. Progressive narratives link experiences or events towards a good evaluative dimension, such as about how the organization will improve. Regressive narratives link experiences or events towards a bad evaluative dimension, such as a resistance to change narrative. Stability narratives keep the evaluative dimension the same, thereby allowing familiar meanings to comfort organizational actors. All three narratives interact to create understanding of stability and change.

### **Poststructuralist Approaches: Narrative Deconstruction and Narrative Emergence**

Narrative analysis has also drawn from postmodernism and poststructuralism, often including critical perspectives. We adopt a broad view on poststructuralism here as a number of poststructuralist influences can be found in streams of narrative organization studies (e.g., Boje, 2014). While interpretative studies focus on the description and elaboration on narratives that play a central role in the social construction of organizational reality, poststructuralist studies aim at uncovering the complexity, fragmentation and fluidity of narrative representations. We highlight two kinds of

poststructuralist studies: narrative deconstruction that aims to problematize prevailing or dominant narratives, and narrative emergence that seeks to uncover the central role of emerging narratives in organizational processes.

**Narrative deconstruction.** A stream of narrative analysis problematizes dominant narratives and narrative authority (Boje 1995; Buchanan 2003; Buchanan & Dawson 2007; Collins & Rainwater 2005; Martin, 1990). Instead of looking for coherent storylines, shared meaning, or common values, narrative deconstruction focuses on multiple meanings, ambiguities and contradictions, and how narratives may privilege some representations and exclude others (Beech, MacPhail & Coupland, 2009; Brown, Humphries & Gurney 2005; Cunliffe et al., 2004).

An early empirical example of such studies is provided by Boje (1995) whose postmodern analysis of Disney focused on storytelling and the various narrative discourses used to describe the corporation's history. The purpose of the analysis was to reveal the marginalized voices and excluded stories of a 'darker side' of the Disney legend. In particular, the analysis contrasted Disney's official Walt-centered narrative with alternative representations and voices. This led Boje (1995) to suggest that organizational storytelling may be characterized by totalisms (hegemonic representations), universalisms (universal generalizations) and essentialisms (objectification of experiences) that easily pass unnoticed in more conventional analysis. He also proposed that Tamara, a play where one can develop alternative storylines, can be used to refer to analysis that seeks to identify different narratives and counter-narratives instead of focusing on dominant or hegemonic ones.

Some studies have more explicitly deconstructed and critiqued particular narrative

representation. For instance, Collins and Rainwater (2005) offer a critical analysis of a widespread account of Sears's corporate transformation. They argued for polyphony and focused attention on ideas and voices that were "edited out" of the dominant narrative. For that purpose, they uncovered bottom-up stories of change to reveal the rich, complex and equivocal nature of organizational change. Analogically, for example, Buchanan and Dawson (2007) have elaborated on the problems of monological, i.e., single-voice and one-sided, research accounts that stifle multiple interpretations and plurivocality. Thus, they have called for an approach that views organizational change as a multi-authored process.

Others have then examined what dominant or monological narratives imply for the individuals involved (Beech et al., 2009; Driver, 2009). Some of these studies have focused on the performativity of narratives, which refers to how specific storylines are repeated and performed with specific implications on people. For example, Driver (2009) drew on Lacanian psychoanalytic theorizing to examine narratives of loss in organizational change. In this view, normal discourse or narrative in and through which people construct the self is an imaginary construction or a fantasy for the person in question. This fantasy tends to create a stable identity for the self and 'fix' one's desires. In her analysis of 40 stories, she promoted the poststructuralist argument that it is not organizational change that makes organizations, work and self lacking, but that it may be change that brings to the surface the lack that is always there. On this basis, she called for alternative types of stories and narratives to highlight the complexities and ambiguities involved and to empower the people confronted with losses.

**Narrative emergence.** Relatedly, studies with a poststructuralist orientation have

also examined how narratives and story come into being or play an ontological role in organizations. This perspective resonates with a so-called strong process perspective on organizing (Chia, 1999; Tsoukas & Chia 2002) according to which organizations are in an on-going state of becoming and flux. Becoming here means an understanding of organizations as continuously reconstructed entities (Tsoukas & Chia 2002). This view has often been called ‘ontological,’ and it draws on Boje’s extensive work on storytelling organizations (Boje, 2008, 2014) that has highlighted the intimate linkages of storytelling and organizing and their ontological implications. The concept of ‘antenarrative’ – a form of narrative that has not yet become widely shared but has the potential to become one (Boje, 2008, 2011) – is useful because it allows one to better understand and examine how specific narratives emerge out of the flux of a number of alternative discourses.

Boje, Rosile, Durant and Luhman (2004) offer an illuminating example of antenarrative analysis in their study of the Enron scandal. They focused on the antenarrative fragments of marginalized and backgrounded stories. They analyzed these antenarratives as part of the mediatised crisis where specific antenarrative ideas and practices resonated with particular actors and audiences. They especially pointed out that corporate power seemed to be linked with the logic of heroic storytelling and resistance linked with the logic of carnival. All this had a major impact on Enron and the way that its scandal unfolded.

In another application of the antenarrative approach, Vaara and Tienari (2011) elucidate the use of narratives as central discursive resources in times of change. They focus on the cultural constitution of organizational change in a merging MNC. In their analysis, they identified three types of antenarratives that provided alternative and



competing resources for making sense of merger: globalist, nationalist, and Nordic. They then analyzed how these antenarratives were mobilized by organizational actors as the merger process unfolded. Following Boje (2008), they elaborated on four types of dialogisms in this mobilization of the antenarratives: polyphony in the form of multiple voices, stylistic dialogisms in terms of various modes of representation, chronotopes as space-time configurations, and architectonic dialogisms in the form of interplay of various cognitive, aesthetic and ethical discourses.

In conclusion, the three main approaches provide very different kinds of bases for narrative analysis of organizational stability and change, and they also offer a means to focus attention on specific research questions. The realist approaches deal with longitudinal representations of stability and change and examine the effects of narratives on other phenomena. Interpretative studies examine the construction of narratives and focus on issues such as polyphony, providing an important window into the multiple meanings of stability and change and their implications for the people involved. Poststructuralist narrative studies criticize hegemonic presentations, uncover marginalized perspectives, focus on narrative performativity or examine organizational emergence and becoming. These approaches help to advance our understanding of the dynamics of stability and change in distinctive but complementary ways. By articulating the differences across these narrative approaches, along with the articulation of the onto-epistemological and methodological bases in any application of narrative analysis in management and organization studies we provide not only an introductory review of narratives in management and organization studies but also a foundation to understand how this approach helps understand stability and change.

## **THE ROLE OF NARRATIVES IN STABILITY AND CHANGE IN KEY AREAS**

Drawing on the three streams of narrative analysis, management and organization scholars have applied narrative analysis to various topics (for reviews, see Boje, 2008; Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Rosile et al., 2013). In this section, we provide an overview of the role of narrative analysis in organizational change, identity, strategy, entrepreneurship and personal change, all of which help unpack the role of narratives in fostering stability and change. These also represent areas of arguably the most important impact of narratives on both theory-development and empirical research. It should be noted that these areas are overlapping and that narrative perspectives have also been used to study other themes such as knowledge (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995; Patriotta, 2003; Shapira, 2011), innovation (Bartel & Garud, 2009) learning (Garud, Dunbar & Gartel, 2001; Morris & Moore, 2000; Oswick et al., 2000) or standardization (Haack, Schoeneborn & Wickert, 2012). Rather than dealing with all potential areas of research that use narratives, we focus on those most central to understanding their role in stability and change..

### **Narrative and Organizational Change**

Various kinds of narrative perspectives have been prominent in research on organizational change. This is not surprising given that change almost necessarily involves a narrative representation because of its temporal development. As devices to capture, interpret, construct and change organizational time, narratives help scholars to understand how organizations evolve and how actors shape this evolution.

**Illustrative studies.** Narrative analyses of organizational change have concentrated on themes such as the meaning of change, plurivocality or polyphony, and the implications of narratives and storytelling on the change process itself (see Table 2 below).

Insert Table 2 around here

Scholars have dug into the meanings of change by interpreting their deep structure in narratives. As noted above, Sköldbberg (1994) viewed organizational change as unfolding dramas that include genres such as tragedy, romantic comedy and satire. Thus, organizational actors weave symbols of organizational change to create accounts of what happens and why. Relatedly, Carlsen (2006) drew on narrative psychology to explain organizational change as a “becoming” process driven by instantiating project experiences as identity exemplars, dramatizing trajectories of practice, and reframing.

Given the complexity of change, it is rare to find a single narrative that captures the expansive nature of change, and hence research on organizational change has focused on multiple interpretations, plurivocality or polyphony. In an early narrative analysis of change, Boje (1991) examined storytelling and its impacts on change in everyday conversations. A key finding was that instead of remaining the same, the stories were dynamic and varied by context. As noted above, Sonenshein (2010) finds that narratives of organizational change differ by the extent to which they construct organizational life as progressive, regressive or stable. By emphasizing the plurivocal or polyphonic aspects of narratives, organizational change narratives can also reveal alternative meanings that impact change that may otherwise go unnoticed. For example, Fronda and Moriceau (2008) examined the change processes during a takeover of a telecommunications company. By emphasizing the often-concealed antenarratives of frontline employees,

scholars can understand resistance not as a blanket rejection of a change but rather as search for meaning and a desire to understand the purpose of change (Ford, Ford, & D'Amelio, 2008; Sonenshein, 2010).

Given the ambiguity during change, narratives can label organizational events in important ways. Different narratives, advanced by varying constituents with their own interests, can portray and shape others' interpretations of the events unfolding around them. In other words, narratives have tremendous power as an organizational scorekeeper. Along these lines, Vaara (2002) examines how narratives socially construct the success or failure of change initiatives. Other scholars have emphasized how narratives keep score of morality during organizational change. Issues around who is narrating and how they shape change processes raises questions of fairness, representation and morality. Sonenshein (2009) examined how narratives ascribe different types of ethics to the same change process, with managers tending to narrate organizational events in strategic terms that conceal morality, and employees emphasizing an employee welfare frame that brings issues of ethics to the foreground. Rhodes, Pullen and Clegg (2010) in turn studied narratives at a technology company and found the telling of "the inevitable fall from grace" such that the once prosperous organization was destined to decline and downsize. This narrative portrayed the organization as a victim rather than an active agent morally responsible for its actions.

Finally, researchers have also elaborated on the agentic role of narratives in organizational change. Buchanan and Dawson (2007) argue that narratives can have causal impacts on organizational change by shaping understandings of the past and trajectories of the future. Not only do actors compete to establish a dominant narrative

about change, but these dominant narratives can also alter the trajectory of the organization in the future. This is particularly likely given that when organizational actors retell narratives, their primary focus is usually not on accuracy. Indeed, Daily and Browning (2014) emphasize that it is narrative repetition in and of itself that promotes change and/or then stabilizes particular meanings. Consequently, narratives shape how organizational actors understand the organization and reconstitute it through their discourse and actions.

**Contribution to stability and change.** This stream of narrative research has helped us to better understand the meaning of organizational change for the actors involved, and thus advanced research on organizational change more generally. In particular, these studies have highlighted how differently individuals or groups may imbue organizational change with different meanings (plurivocality or polyphony). Furthermore, narrative analyses of organizational change have shown how the narratives themselves or organizational storytelling may have significant implications for promoting change or maintaining stability.

**Untapped research questions.** Although we know a great deal of organizational change, a narrative perspective affords the opportunity to address issues and questions other approach have left unresolved. For instance, given that temporality plays such a pivotal role during change, a narrative perspective's emphasis on temporality (Cunliffe, Luhman & Boje, 2004) affords the opportunity to investigate how organizational actors subjectively experience time to make meaning of unfolding change. Similarly, a closer analysis of polyphony and its forms in change (Belova, King & Sliwa, 2008) could help to better understand how interpretations of change diverge or converge in unfolding

change processes and the implications. Finally, it would be interesting to know more about the rhetorical means that may determine whether storytelling is influential in promoting organizational change or undermining its success.

### **Narratives and Identity**

Narratives have played a prominent role in research on personal, work, professional, organizational, and national identities. This is easy to understand given the proliferation of research linking identity and identification with narratives in various streams of social sciences (Bruner 1986, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988; Ricoeur 1983). Furthermore, landmark studies of organizational culture and identity have from the start emphasized the role of stories or narratives (Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin, 1983).

**Illustrative studies.** Narrative analyses have focused on identity-building at individual, organizational and national levels of analysis and examined related dynamics of identity building (see Table 3 below).

Insert Table 3 around here

Narrative research has examined identity-building at the individual level. Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) elaborate on the narrative forms of expressing and claiming identity. They develop a theoretical model of narrative identity work that elaborates on the role of authenticity (construction of the self) and validation (perceiving the narrative as credible) in such storying. This leads them to emphasize coherence, legitimation and audience reaction in these narratives. Whittle, Mueller and Manghan (2009) studied the role of stories in the construction of actors' moral status and organizational reputation. Their analysis concentrates on the development of a key actor whose identity shifted from that

of an innocent victim to a villain to a heroic survivor in the stories constructed during routine work conversations. Thus, the nature of ‘moral accounting’ varied depending on the need to save face in the interactional situation. Gabriel, Gray and Goregaokar (2010) examined stories of managers facing unemployment. Their analysis identifies three narrative coping strategies that unemployed managers used to make sense of the dismissal and to sustain their self-identity. Those who were the most severely hit seemed to reach closure in their narratives whereas those who maintained a more positive outlook for the future appeared to produce more open-ended narratives. In another context, Wright, Nyberg and Grant (2012) examined how individuals deal with controversial issues such as climate change. They demonstrated how individuals seek to overcome conflicts between identities in constructing a coherent narrative of themselves and their careers. Koerner (2014) has in turn focused on identity and workplace courage. Her study distinguishes between four distinct forms of courage and one storyline that reflects a lack of courage.

Narrative analyses have also focused on the linkage of individual and organizational identities. Fiol (2002) theorizes that narratives both reflect and produce processes of identification in discourse. In adopting a Lewin-inspired framework of unfreeze-move-refreeze, she theorizes that narratives help employees bridge change and stability by providing them with language to dis-identify with the old and re-identify with the new. Similarly, Humphreys and Brown (2002) studied organizational identification and resistance. They demonstrated that in addition to embracing organizational identities, the narratives could involve neutral, dis-, schizo-identification. Neutral identification means a distanced linkage between the self-identity and that of the organizational identity

narrative. Dis-identification describes an active and negative connection between the self-identity and that of the organization. Schizo-identification means simultaneous identification and identification with the organizational narratives. Brown (2006) has later elaborated on the role of reflexivity, voice, plurivocity, temporality, and fictionality as key parts of the construction of collective identities.

Narratives specifically provide means to construct and reconstruct the identity and purpose of an organization (Chreim, 2007). An early example is Boje's (1995) analysis of Disney that contrasts the dominant widespread identity narrative with other interpretations. As noted above, this analysis specifically helps to understand the implications of some narratives becoming dominant while other interpretations are stifled. Chreim (2005) examined how narratives of organizational identity enable an organization to manage continuity and change by selectively telling aspects of an organization's past, present and future. She focuses on how organizations also use expansive labels that allow for the addition and subtraction of meanings to confirm identity changes advanced by senior managers, even while media accounts provide alternative interpretations. Phillips (2008) uses narratives to examine how institutional trust at Citigroup becomes undermined because of ambiguity in the firm's identity after a merger, and later becomes undermined by the lack of employee identification with the new organization. This study suggests the importance of narratives in providing a viable identity which resonates with employees. Ybema (2010) also examined how organizational actors at a Dutch newspaper recasted their identities by contrasting the old with the new. Wry, Lounsbury and Glynn (2011) in turn focus on how nascent collective identities are legitimated. They argue that legitimacy is more likely to be achieved when



members share and spread a collective identity story. Similarly, Schultz and Hernes (2013) provide a temporal perspective on organizational identity in which constructions of the past, present and future play a crucial role. Their case study of LEGO provides examples of two occasions where the past was evoked distinctively differently to influence claims for future identity. Thus, these studies point to the various narrative and rhetorical means to promote specific organizational identities.

Finally, some studies have focused on national and international identities. For instance, Gertsen and Søderberg (2011) have shown how narrative methods provide useful tools to understand identity construction in international settings. They focus on two stories told about the cooperation between a Danish and a Chinese manager and highlight how the plots and turning points differed and allow one to better understand cultural differences and identification in MNCs. In another study, Vaara and Tienari (2011) examined how managers and the media mobilized antenarratives to construct national, inter-national and global identities in a merging banking group. These identity constructions proved to be crucial in legitimating change.

**Contribution to stability and change.** This stream of narrative research has highlighted identity-building dynamics at individual, organizational and international levels of analysis. These studies have shown how narratives are an essential means to maintain identities, reshape existing identities, or to build new ones. They also demonstrate how these narratives constantly reconstruct understandings of the past, present and future, including opportunities for revision and resistance.

**Untapped research questions.** Although we now know a great deal about the central role of narratives in identity-building, recent studies indicate that there is much more to

be studied to better understand the complexities, ambiguities and contradictions in identity narratives. Of special interest is the relationships between individual and organizational identity narratives as they inform us about people's identification with organizations and their reactions to change, including resistance. It would also be important to examine in more detail the rhetorical and discursive means through which particular organizational identities are constructed and legitimated. Not only verbal or written texts, but also visual representations and material artefacts are likely to play an important role in these processes, and their analysis remains a key challenge for future research. This is especially relevant in light of the proliferation of narratives about organizations outside of the focal organization, such as on the internet and in social media networks.

### **Narratives and Strategy**

Strategy research offers an important area for our review as it helps to provide a means for organizations to bridge change and stability as they adapt to the environment. This is especially the case with strategy process and practice studies as well as research on strategic change (closely related to the studies referred in the subsection on organizational change).

**Illustrative studies.** Most of this research has been theoretical in orientation, with a surprisingly few number of studies providing empirical perspectives (see Table 4 below).

Insert Table 4 around here

In a landmark theoretical paper, Barry and Elmes (1997) provocatively put forth a view on strategic management as fiction and more specifically conceptualized strategy as a form of narrative. Drawing on the narrative theory of Shklovsky, they argued that as

narratives strategies must be credible (or believable) and defamiliarizing (or novel) and that there is often a tension between these two aims. They also distinguished between specific genres of strategy narrative: epic (dramatic, heroic tales), technofuturist (complex and detailed ‘quasi-scientific’ texts) and purist (defamiliarizing, almost atemporal stories) genres. Drawing on Bakhtin, Boje (2008) proposed several alternative forms of strategy narratives: Greek romantic, everyday, analytic, biographic, chivalric, reversal of historical realism, clown-rogue-fool, Rabelaisian purge, basis for Rabelaisian, idyllic and castle room. In his analysis, Boje underscores analysis that strategy is and should be told in multiple voices and through multiple stories. Like Boje, Vaara and Pedersen (2014) have used the Bakhtian concept of ‘chronotope’ (the configuration of time and space in narratives) to elucidate the temporal aspects of strategy narratives. They argue that specific chronotopes characterize particular literary genres, which each can serve as bases for different strategy narratives. Along these lines, Fenton and Langley (2011) have elaborated on the central role of narratives in the practices of strategy-making. They argue that narratives can be found in the micro-stories of organizational members, in the techniques of strategizing, in the accounts people provide of their work and in the various artefacts produced by strategizing.

In a rare empirical analysis, Dunford and Jones (2000) elaborated on the various narratives told by senior management in the context of strategic change in three organizations. Their analysis highlighted the role of narrative in top managerial sensegiving and underscored the variations of narratives in the organizations studied, including negative reactions to the narratives told by senior managers. In another empirical study, Brown and Humphreys (2003) found that senior managers explained

events in narratives of strategy shifts, whereas two groups of employees provided tragic narratives. Küpers, Mantere and Statler (2013) have in turn studied strategy as a lived experience. They focused on three narrative practices in a strategic workshop: discursive struggles over ‘hot’ words (debates about key terms used in strategy discussions), the de-sacralization of strategy (unraveling the ‘sacred’ nature of formal strategies) and recurring rituals of self-sacrifice (unraveling of the expected roles and responsibilities of the people involved). Finally, others such as Kaplan and Orlikowski (2013) have focused on temporality in strategy-making and elaborated on how constructions of the past, present and future are a central part of strategy work, thus elucidating the role of narrative in strategy-making.

**Contribution to stability and change.** These studies have provided us with an understanding of how strategy-making involves sensegiving and narratives. Thus, strategies can be understood as retrospective narratives (constructions of the future, past) and antenarrative (constructions on possible futures) and present) that are used to bring about strategic change in organizations. Central to this activity is managerial storytelling and the reactions that it triggers from organizational members. Thus, narrative analyses have considerably added to our understanding of the role of language and communication in strategy-making in general and strategic change in particular (Balogun et al., 2014).

**Untapped research questions.** There are still few empirical studies of strategic narratives or storytelling. Thus, there is a need to elaborate on the narrative ideas and for example study the forms of narrative and processes of strategic storytelling in various empirical contexts. Empirical analysis of what makes specific strategy narratives persuasive or convincing would also enrich our understanding of the effects of strategic

storytelling. In addition, a closer analysis of how organizational members may or may not spread the strategy narratives would be valuable to better understand how new strategies may be enacted or resisted.

### **Narratives and Entrepreneurship**

Narratives have also started to play an increasingly important role in entrepreneurship. This is because narratives provide a natural means for describing entrepreneurial experiences and ‘journeys’ and because storytelling has been found to be a key part in gathering resources and establishing legitimacy in and around narrative ventures. Thus, the narrative perspective has been promoted as an alternative to the more conventional understandings of entrepreneurship (Garud & Karnoe, 2003; Garud & Giuliani, 2013; Steyaert and Hjort, 2004).

**Illustrative studies.** Narrative analyses of entrepreneurship have often focused on the interrelated themes of narrative identity and legitimacy and the implications for resource acquisition (see Table 5 below).

Insert Table 5 around here

Narratives can be seen as an inherent part of entrepreneurial identity and legitimacy. In their seminal study, Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) focused on the storytelling as the means to use cultural resources to establish legitimacy for entrepreneurial ventures. They outline a framework that elaborates how entrepreneurial stories help to establish a new venture identity that serves as a basis for persuading and convincing various stakeholders to support the venture. In her pioneering paper, O’Connor (2002) argued that narrative sensemaking of past events plays a key part in an entrepreneur’s identity construction and

emphasizes the entrepreneur's discursive ability to adopt a position relative to distinct but interconnected plotlines in which various relevant actors figure as key characters.

Narrative studies of entrepreneurship have also frequently examined the crucial role of narratives and storytelling in gaining resources. In particular, Martens et al. (2007) examined the effect of entrepreneurial storytelling on resource acquisition. Their analysis highlighted narrative devices used such as persuasive appeals, elaboration, and familiarity and unfamiliarity. Other studies have then focused on the construction of entrepreneurial opportunities in and through narratives. For example, Garud and Giuliani (2013) argue for a narrative view in which social, opportunity, and material spaces are woven together. Garud, Schildt and Lant (2014) extend this work by focusing on projective stories that set expectations for new ventures. They particularly highlight the challenge that the very expectations that are set through projective stories to gain legitimacy can also serve as the source of future disappointments.

Others have focused on how entrepreneurs make sense of success and failure. For instance, Mantere et al. (2013) examined narrative attributions in entrepreneurs' accounts of failure. They identified and elaborated on Catharsis" (personal responsibility), "Hubris" (venture-wide responsibility), "Zeitgeist" (industry-wide responsibility), "Betrayal" (responsible agent inside the venture), "Nemesis" (responsible external agent), "Mechanistic" (uncontrollable non-human element within the venture), and "Fate" (uncontrollable non-human element external to the venture) as distinct types of narrative attributions that served particular social functions when coping with the experience of failure. Still others have focused on institutional entrepreneurship, often in relation to the central role of discourse in institutions. For instance, Zilber (2007) has examined the role

of stories in the discursive dynamics of institutional entrepreneurship. Her analysis highlights how actors were engaged in constructing a shared story of the crisis that reflected and further strengthened the established institutional order, but also how the same actors were also each telling a counter-story of indictment, blaming other groups for the crisis and calling for changes in the institutional order.

There are also more critical analysis of entrepreneurial narratives. Steyaert and Hjort (2004) provides an overview various kinds of postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives on entrepreneurship. For instance, Nicholson and Anderson (2005) have examined the role of myths and metaphors as key parts of the social construction of entrepreneurial culture in the media. Their analysis highlights images of male entrepreneurs as dynamic wolfish charmers, supernatural gurus, successful skyrockets or community saviors and corrupters. These analyses thus provide means to critically evaluate the cultural and discursive bases of entrepreneurship.

**Contribution to stability and change.** Narrative analyses of entrepreneurship helps us understand entrepreneurial identity, legitimation and resource acquisition. These areas highlight how narratives and storytelling promote ventures and thus enable change such as through growth and legitimation. However, narrative analysis also allows us to see how entrepreneurial narratives reproduce prevailing understandings of what entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship are like, thus maintaining institutional order.

**Untapped research questions.** While significant advances have been made with the narrative perspective on entrepreneurship, many issues and questions remained unanswered (Garud & Giuliani, 2013). For instance, empirical narrative analyses of entrepreneurial opportunity creation are scarce, and little is known about the various

cultural aspects of entrepreneurial activities, which could be analyzed by narrative methods. As businesses that often grow substantially over time, there are also important opportunities to trace entrepreneurial narratives as organizations expand or even dissolve.

### **Narratives and Personal Change**

While not as developed as the other topical areas we covered above, scholars have also examined narratives to understand how people interpret their developing selves. A focus on these individual level narratives help elucidate ways in which employees understand their own professional trajectories over time, something that can influence their motivation or other work-related choices (Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner & Sheep, 2009).

**Illustrative studies.** Narrative analyses of personal change have mostly focused on personal growth and the problems that it entails (see Table 6 below).

Insert Table 6 around here

In an early study, Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy & Quinn (2005) theorized a “reflective best self portrait”—a changing narrative about how people view themselves when they are at their best. They propose that this narrative emerges from social experiences and provides a model of best self development about deliberately changing and growing themselves towards more desirable states. Maitlis (2009) in turn discussed the growth that may emerge from trauma among musicians plagued with a physical condition that required they abandon their profession. She emphasizes the importance of a positive outlook in the face of setbacks in individual’s posttraumatic growth narratives. She found that narratives allow people to understand their identities as they shift and provide an opportunity for positive change. She articulated the processes to construct new



identities, which includes a shifting between stability (old self) and change (new self).

Shipp and Jansen (2011) employed a narrative lens to person-environment fit research. The narrative lens is particularly helpful to their proposed theory given the scarcity of fit research that has examined change over time. While fit experiences inevitably change over time, and context inevitably shapes these experiences, a shift from psychological perspectives to narrative perspectives highlights both the changing nature of fit, as well as points of stability, and how both aspects are contextually embedded.

Another example of personal narratives come from Lawrence and Maitlis (2012) who theorized an 'ethic of care' based on narrative practices embedded in enduring relationships. They focus on how team members construct their experiences, struggles, and future-oriented stories and identify three caring narrative practices: constructing histories of sparkling moments, contextualizing struggles, and constructing polyphonic future-oriented stories.

Building on the theme of positive, self-change, Sonenshein, Dutton, Grant, Spreitzer and Sutcliffe (2013) studied employees working for a financial services, manufacturing and non-profit company to understand how they narrate their growing. They identified three types of growing narratives—achieving, learning and helping. Positioned against predominately psychological theories of growing, the researchers develop theory around how growing narratives are deeply embedded in organizational contexts. Individuals draw from not only personal resources but also contextual resources to construct a narrative about their positive self-change, reflecting their idiosyncratic paths but also drawing from common contextual resources that promote a sense of stability among organizational members. Accordingly, a focus on narratives allows for

understanding how even the seemingly personal growth of an individual is nonetheless deeply intertwined with broader organizational (and even societal narratives) that produces common, stable paths out of the unique experiences and choices people make.

**Contributions to stability and change.** Personal narratives remind researchers that organizations are comprised of individuals who narrate their own experiences at work. Just like organizational narratives unfold dynamics between change and stability, so too do individuals try to use narratives to make sense and give sense of their own experiences at work. However, individuals tell these stories embedded in organizational contexts, suggesting a strong intertwinement of personal narratives which are contextually embedded in organizational narratives. As individuals create meanings of personal growth, they provide opportunities to contribute to organizations that can enhance their capabilities and improve their practices.

**Untapped research questions.** We see opportunities for scholars to understand deeper the way in which personal narratives shape organizational narratives. Much of existing research focuses on the way that organizational narratives shape individuals, such as through research on socialization (Saks and Ashforth, 1997). These contextually embedded personal narratives are important, but personal narratives no doubt also shape organizational ones, and more research is needed to unravel the deep intertwinement between personal and organizational narratives.

In summary, we have covered key topic areas that have used narrative research to illuminate dynamics of stability and change. This overview shows richness in the various theoretical perspectives taken and methods used for theorizing and empirically examining narratives. It also points to a number of opportunities in future research.

## **DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Drawing on our review, we now outline key areas that warrant additional attention in future research. We identify both theoretical opportunities and methodological opportunities for scholars seeking to use narratives in their research.

### **Theoretical Opportunities**

Our review has highlighted the complexity of organizational narratives as objects of study. This complexity is a challenge for narrative analysis, but also an opportunity to advance our understanding of some of the key issues related to stability and change that cut across various topics areas. These include narrative pluralism, reproduction, mobilization, resistance, dialogicality, inclusion/exclusion, and temporality.

**Narrative pluralism.** As an inherently “messy” phenomenon, organizational change frequently unfolds with multiple narratives offered by multiple parties with their own agendas (e.g., Brown, 1998; Creed, Scully and Austin, 2002; Dawson, 2005).

Understanding this pluralism is not only important for researchers seeking to craft their own narratives about what happened but also because they address the heart of the how organizational change unfolds as a cacophony of political interests vie to make sense and give sense of change (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). As should be clear by now, narratives occur at multiple levels of analysis, and scholars usually foreground a subset of these levels, particularly the role of top leader’s narratives (e.g. Podolny et al., 2005). Thus, there exist opportunities to integrate theorizing and analysis of these multiple levels of analysis. While interpretative narrative studies have frequently analyzed plurivocality or polyphony, there is a need to connect these multiple voices to organizational processes at

multiple levels of analysis to better understand stability and change.

**Narrative reproduction.** Although a great deal of attention has been focused on particular narratives, the subtle mechanisms of their reproduction warrant more attention in future research. Boje's (2008) work on antenarratives provides one way to understand how new narratives may emerge among many alternatives. Dailey and Browning (2013) focus attention on narrative repetition as a process that plays a key role in explaining how stories spread and how the meaning of these stories shifts over time. In particular, they argue that when stories are retold, some individuals may see them as stability, whereas others may hear a hint of change (see also, Sonenshein, 2010). Accounting for these diverse narratives, and how they coalesce to advocate for the status quo, or alternatively, push for change, remains a ripe opportunity for additional research.

**Narrative mobilization.** In addition to understanding how specific narratives are reproduced, it is important to understand how particular narratives may play a crucial role in mobilization for change. In particular, Robichaud, Giroux and Taylor (2004) have outlined a 'metaconversation' perspective that helps to understand the relationship of an overall organizational discourse with various local conversations. Analogically, one can focus attention on new 'metanarratives' that may bring individuals and their own narratives together. This links with the more recent work by Cooren (2010) that focuses on coorientation – the ability of discourses or narratives to serve as objects that coorient the activities of organizational actors. From this perspective, one can examine how organizational change is related to a production of coorienting narrative that serves to engage and mobilize people. Future research could examine such processes more closely to better understand how new narratives are created and how individual actors or broader

communities engage with this emerging narrative to mobilize for change.

**Narrative resistance.** Moving forward, we scholars have the opportunity to expand the collection of narratives beyond dominant coalitions and capture more marginalized narratives. Historically, scholars have focused on narratives of resistance that couch any discourse contrary to top management as disruptive of change (Ford et al., 2008). Yet, these narratives not only keep the conversation about change going but also inevitably enrich the dominant narrative of change. As a result, we see opportunities for scholars to unpack the webs of meaning provided by a range of internal and external stakeholders that try to shape the future trajectory of an organization, whether that involves new strategies, products, routines, and so on, or a return to the status quo. For external stakeholders, in an age where the internet empowers the marginalized with an audience for their stories, scholars have opportunities to locate and understand the impact of these narratives. For example, externally generated narratives from marginalized groups might provoke important change within an organization (e.g., King and Soule, 2007)

**Narrative dialogicality.** There is a tendency in narrative analysis to focus on specific narratives or acts of storytelling while their dialogical dynamics have received less attention. Although some narratives may become dominant ones and be resisted, we argue that a full understanding of the role of narratives in organizational stability and change also requires special attention on how they relate to each other in dialogical or dialectical processes (Boje, 2008; Vaara & Tienari, 2011). This is because different kinds of narratives are used to promote or resist change. For example, progressive, regressive and stability narratives serve different ‘functions’ in organizational change (Sonenshein, 2010). Narratives may also draw from different genres depending on their use and

purpose in organizational settings. For instance, strategies may be constructed in very different ways in epic, technofuturist and purist narratives (Barry & Elmes, 1997), and epic and tragic tales provide very different means for making sense of change (Brown & Humphreys, 2003). A key challenge for future research is thus to examine the dialogical processes between the actors and types of narratives and how they unfold over time as part of organizational stability and change.

**Narrative exclusion/inclusion.** Interpretative and poststructuralist scholars have pointed to the need to examine various alternative narratives. In particular, Boje's (1995) work on Tamara helps to understand how stories may unfold in alternative ways. This perspective has recently been expanded by Hitchin (2014, 2015) by elaborating on the politics of alternative narratives in terms of their implications on how specific voices are privileged and others marginalized. Research that focuses on such exclusion/inclusion is critically important to understanding organizational change where an actor's discourse can frame the direction of the organization and its meaning (e.g., Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). In an era of ambiguity, narratives have the opportunities to bring provisional clarity, thereby making inclusion and exclusion dynamics critical to understanding the direction of change or the defense of the status quo.

**Narrative temporality.** Throughout this review, we have emphasized the special value of narratives to capture the temporal aspects of stability and change. While important advances have been made in the studies referred to above (e.g., Cunliffe et al., 2004; Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Schultz & Hernes, 2013), there is a need for additional research to understand better the various ways in which temporality features in narratives of stability and change and how storytelling in turn structures the temporal unfolding of

organizational change. Ricœur's (1988) classical work emphasizes the inherent potential of narratives to capture different understandings of temporal orientation, but this stream of research has been largely untapped in organizational narrative analysis. Bakhtin has spoken about chronotopes, that is space-time configurations in narratives, which has inspired for example Pedersen's work (2008). However, there is much more to temporality in organizational stability and change that can and should be examined in future research.

### **Methodological Challenges**

While there already are a variety of methodological applications of narrative analysis, we highlight key issues that warrant attention in future research: transparency and reflection in the composition of narratives, the use of new forms of data, and new tools of analysis and representation.

**Transparency and reflection in composition.** Given the complexity of organizational narratives, their identification, selection and representation serve as a crucial issue that has received inadequate attention in organization studies. Given that an important part of conducting qualitative research is for the author to construct his or her own narrative (Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007), it becomes incumbent on scholars to piece the fragments of alternative organizational narratives together and to reflect on the extent to which these capture the fully array of actors offering narratives (versus focusing on only the dominant coalition where research access is granted) as well as explaining the variety of types of narratives told to shape change and stability inside organizations. This challenge is of utmost importance for realist narrative analysis that seeks to provide an

authentic description of a sequences of events and processes. Interpretative scholars face the same issue in another way as they typically create composite narratives that piece narrative fragments together. Finally, for poststructuralist scholars, critical analysis of dominant and alternative narratives is a major goal but what narratives are chosen and elaborated on remains a crucial issue. We think the best direction involves transparency and methodological reflection in narrative analysis to highlight the key choices made in collecting, analyzing and presenting narratives. He encourage scholars to provide this crucial information in methods sections..

**New forms of data.** The focus of contemporary narrative research has been on written texts (reflecting the literary tradition or linguistic analysis) or oral communication (representing the folkloristic tradition), and this type of discourse in textual form has been the dominant means to understand the dynamics of stability and change (Boje, 1991; Brown, 1998, 2003; Sonenshein, 2010). While this type of data has helped unearth important insights about change and stability, several potentially valuable sources of data remain under-examined. In addition to written texts or oral communication, organizational narratives can involve video, sound and other forms of semiosis (Meyer et al., 2013; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). For example, videos might better capture the valence of narratives because of their richer ability to account for emotions. The changing emotional tone for an organization can provide important clues about change (Huy, 2002), including about stability (emotions such as calmness) or turbulence (emotions such as anxiety). Videos also allow leaders of an organizational change to disperse their message to a wider audience, something that can extend the reach of narratives to broader areas of the organization. Young and Post (1993) found that video communications often



privilege a top management perspective on change. An analysis of these forms of narrative may unpack important power dynamics that promote stability (e.g., positive interpretations of an organization's status quo) or generate change (e.g., create urgency by alerting employees to the dangers of the status quo) using video, but scholars may also want to examine how video data provides an equally important means for employees to push back during change, such as through dispensing these narratives via social media. Other alternative data sources include photographs, which offer a snapshot in time that momentarily freezes a phenomenon, process or practice. Sørensen (2014) recently used photographs in his analysis of organizational aesthetics. Visual presentations such through PowerPoint presentations provide another important source of narrative data (e.g., Kaplan, 2011) scholars have too infrequently acknowledged.

Due to technological advances, new forms of narratives and storytelling have also emerged, and this especially the case with the mass and social media. There already are narrative analyses that draw on mass media (Boje et al., 2004; Vaara & Tienari, 2011), but there is room for increasingly comprehensive and sophisticated analyses that would be able to harness the richness of media coverage around organizational phenomena. Social media provides a largely untapped source of narrative data, where text, picture, video, and so on often get intertwined to tell a story. Already, researchers have used narratives from crowdfunding websites to capture the stories individuals tell to acquire resources to positively change their business or selves (Herzenstein, Sonenshein & Dholakia, 2011). Given the sheer amount of narratives that exist on the internet, scholars have opportunities to study the formation and spread of these narratives and how they shape organizational life. More detailed and richer modes of narratives may make more

interesting and theoretically rich data but scholars are just beginning to experiment with how best to use this data.

**New tools of narrative analysis and representation.** While narrative analysis has usually been associated with qualitative analysis, it is also important to emphasize the potential of more systematic forms of analysis that can deal with large amounts of different types of data. There are examples of tools used especially in realist narrative analysis, but in many ways narrative scholars have been shy to make use of the potential offered by recent software development. Yet qualitative software such as NVivo now allow for video coding that could be very useful for multimodal narrative analysis. Although for example Pentland and Feldman (2007) have outlined a network-based approach to study the interlinkages of narratives in networks of texts, the potential of for example textual network analysis has not been realized in narrative studies. There are also other computer- or software-based forms of analysis that could help organizational narrative analysis to reap the potential of larger corpuses such as media material. Such forms of analysis and tools may also be used as first steps in analyses to map out broader patterns even if the focus would be on close qualitative analysis of the role of specific narratives in organizational stability and change.

Furthermore, journals are starting to experiment with presenting richer modes narratives to accompany texts. For example, the *Academy of Management Journal* is currently experimenting with embedding video and audio in electronic versions of papers. As technology continues to advance in ways that allow for the presentation of scholarly narratives beyond the written text, we will likely see more creativity with the sources of data that take us beyond traditional narrative modes.

## **CONCLUSION**

Narratives research has developed a great deal over the past few decades. Our hope is that by providing a guided tour of the diverse perspectives on organizational narrative analysis, we have presented a useful overview of this potentially generative but also occasionally intimidating body of knowledge.

In this review, we have focused on the key role of narratives in understanding stability and change in organizations. Narratives allow scholars to understand, describe and ultimately explain dynamics between stability and change, whether at the micro, meso or macro levels. A focus on sensemaking, sensegiving and temporality uniquely position narratives to unpack a core duality of stability and change that pervades theories of organizing, organizational theory and organizational behavior. This has made us emphasize temporality as a key characteristic of narratives, which reveals important aspects of stability and change, and focus attention on the power of narratives to influence organizational processes. Our review also demonstrates that polyphony (multiple interpretations) is an essential but demanding part of narrative analysis and that the processes of narrative emergence are crucial to understand how change may come about.

By outlining the underlying assumptions to three core narrative approaches—realist, interpretive, and poststructuralist—we have offered different starting points to engage with organizational narrative research, reflecting distinctive epistemological and ontological foundations as well as methodological choices. As we have shown, there are many opportunities for narrative research to continue to flourish and grow from multiple perspectives. While narratives have become a key part of specific topic areas such as

research on organizational change or identity, their full potential remains to be unleashed. Moreover, in other areas such as strategy-making theoretical advances with narratives have not yet been followed by a significant body of empirical research. In this paper, we have also focused on themes that can advance organizational narrative perspectives, both theoretically and methodologically. By developing narrative theorizations and methods along such lines, we can not only advance narrative applications in organization studies, but also develop organizational narrative analysis as a research area that helps better understand stability and change.

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