Organizational remembering as a narrative practice: “storying” the past in the banking realm

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This abstract conceptualizes organizational remembering as a narrative practice and addresses questions regarding both the location of remembering in organizations and the historicity of remembering practices. The paper illustrates the relevance of narrative constructs for the study of organizational remembering.

Twenty years ago, Walsh and Ungson drew attention to the concept of organizational memory with a seminal work in the Academy of Management Review. In their article they referred to organizational memory as “stored information from an organizational history that can be brought to bear on present decisions” (1991, p.61), providing an articulation of its acquisition, retention and retrieval through storage bins (individual, culture, transformations, structures, ecology) and external archives.

The repository image and the articulation provided have evoked different responses (Casey, 1997; Nissley and Casey 2002, Feldman and Feldman 2006, Booth and Rowlinson 2006, Rowlinson et al. 2010, Casey and Olivera 2011), in which the contested assumptions on the acquisition, retention and retrieval in the information-system process have been paired with socio-historical accounts of the notion of memory.

As argued by Feldman and Feldman (2006), the first step in the direction of a “conceptualization of organizational remembering as a collective, culture and time-specific process and practice” implies a shift in terminology from “organizational memory” (an object) to “organizational remembering” (a practice) (p.862). The concern with remembering rather than memory entails two questions that remain unsolved in Walsh and Ungson’s conceptualization (1991): one dealing with the social and relational aspects of remembering and the other dealing with the historicity of remembering. Remembering practices are social and relational practices, as we remember for others and through others. If the social context in which remembering takes place cannot be neglected, the same can be said for the time in which the remembering takes place. Remembering is a historically situated practice as we remember the past from the present. If the storage bin metaphor deals with memory as an object “out there” where remembered events are crystallized in ex-post reconstruction, the “storying” perspective proposed deals with a view “from within” (Shotter, 2006), where living stories of “here” and “now” continuously shape and are shaped by the socio-historical context in which they emerge.

The location of organizational memory remains an unsolved dilemma in the work of Walsh and Ungson (1991), and mirrors an aporia that remains alive in the organizational memory literature, that is to say the treatment of organizational memory as both an individual and organizational-level construct. This aporia has been paired with mechanistic models of understanding and ways of reducing complexity that “vacillate between putting emphasis on either the individual or organizational component of memory” (Feldman and Feldman, 2006, p.864). Organizational scholars have
incorporated notions from the social memory studies, and translated concepts such as collective memory into the organizational realm.

The historicity of organizational remembering deals with the duration of the past in the present and the effect of the present on the remembering of the past. Conceptualizing the reconstruction of past events cannot neglect dealing with time and chronological sequence. If historicity in terms of chronology has not been overlooked by models such as that of Walsh and Ungson (1991), their view reflects what Boje would refer as “linear-positional, hierarchically anchoring of narratives to one of more center points” (Boje, 2008, p. 87). This entails a view of historicity as a conscious frame rather than an interpretative method.

The shift from organizational memory to organizational remembering raises concerns over the forms in which it emerges and crystallizes in organizational settings. Conceptualizing organizational remembering as a narrative practice accommodates discussions over location of remembering and historicity of remembering. Narrative practices of remembering draw attention to the space where the subjective becomes tenable within certain socio-historical structures, or relations. For Halbwachs, the collective memory of a group is not only the whole of representations of the past that are collected and transmitted within a group, but also a common way of interpreting them. Narrative practices deal with both the content of the narration and the way in which the content is recounted in different moments and places of organizational life. Corporate narratives, working life stories, anecdotes and instructions become the tapestry that arises from interaction at different organizational levels, becoming a frame within which organizational members negotiate their organizational everyday life. When Namer (1987) affirms that memory is essentially a narrative act, we can say that organizational remembering can be seen as a narrative practice, where the “storying” organizes the selection and interpretation of past events in a relational and contingent remembering process that does not belong to the past but lives in the present from which it is activated and in which it crystallizes. The context in which memory is activated and can be storied (as opposed to stored) addresses the issue of the location of memory in a way that can be retraced to Boje’s contrasts between the beginning, middle and end models and Tamara’s sensemaking, which “assumes story location in space-time context, and sequence of story trajectory as well as how the sequence of stories each person experiences affects the meaning ascribed in the present” (2008, p.87).

Narrative practice, as Bruner affirms, “is a precondition for our collective life in culture. I doubt such collective life would be possible were it not for our human capacity to organize and communicate experience in a narrative form” (p.16). He continues, “For it is the conventionalization of narrative that converts individual experience into collective coin, which can be circulated, as it were, on a base wider than a merely interpersonal one. Being able to read another’s mind need depend no longer on sharing some narrow ecological or interpersonal niche but, rather, on a common fund of myth, folktale, “common sense.” (Bruner (2002, p.16)

If organizational remembering can be seen as a narrative practice, we can say that the representation of the past deals with narrative time. “Storying” represents a way of conceptualizing the tying together of the subjective and the collective in narrative space-time, where narrative time becomes amplified by infinite combinatorial spaces “akin to Derrida’s difference, Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, or my own Tamara (Boje, 2008, 83) in a bet on “transformation of not only collective memory, but also reflexivity of what might be future possibilities” (2008, p.81). In the “storying” perspective, the historicity of remembering is informed by the constitutive role of language as a re-inscription of historical events into the narrative time of organizational members, following the suggestion of Bakhtin that “even in life we see the story with the eye of the plot”
Storytelling has been defined as “an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience” (Boje, 1991, p. 111). Storytelling conceived in this way is opposed to linear narratives, though controversy can be found in the management and organizational realm on definition of stories and narrative among different scholars such as Czarniawska, Gabriel and Boje (Boje, 1991, 1995, 2001, 2008; Czarniawska, 1997, 1998, 2004, Gabriel, 1991, 2000). I define “storying” as more than ex-post reconstruction of events or projections into the future, as “storying” lives in the middle ground of the here-and-now where the “exchanges between structure and the event, between system and act, do not cease to be complicated and renewed” (Ricoeur, 1974, p. 95).

The theoretical reflection will be coupled with a discussion of empirical material stemming from two research projects carried out in the banking industry. The first case deals with narrative processes of remembering in a community bank in the Southwest of the United States, which has undergone subsequent acquisitions in the 1990s and 2000s. Data were collected from 2006 to 2009. The second case deals with narrative processes of remembering in a Scandinavian bank, which has embarked on Greenfield operation in the UK starting in the 1990s. Data were collected from 2010 to 2011. My contribution to the field of organizational memory and social memory studies will be pointing out the relevance and possibilities offered by the use of a “storying” approach to discuss the narrative processes of remembering for the production of social organizational memory.

References


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