Analyzing Stories for a Deeper Understanding of Corporate Culture: The psychohistory of Lloyd deMause as a narrative analytical method

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The corporate culture approach is considered central to the understanding of the dynamics of organizations. Because corporate culture mirrors unconscious contexts of meaning, culture analyses in organizations are becoming increasingly important. Narratives convey culture, so why not use narratives for the analysis of organizational cultures? The combination of data collection through work biographies with a 'narrative analytical method' such as the psychoanalytical fantasy-word method of Lloyd deMause points out new ways of approaching organizations and their knowledge potential. This article describes the background and the accomplishment of such a research process.

**Key words:** Organizational culture; sense-making; organizational stories; psychohistory

To comprehend collective corporate meaning

It is limited to base the analysis of patterns of corporate organizational culture only on empirically observable and quantifiable aspects of organizations. Yet, there are only few methodological instruments that allow latent aspects of an organization to be seen. Corporate culture cannot be exhaustively analyzed and one possibility is to use process-oriented diagnostics and to interpret the data through a sense-making process.

Patterns of corporate culture can be revealed through dialogue and made accessible through interpretation. In order to understand, discuss and deal with subjective phenomena, the direct experience of the researcher or consultant with the culture is necessary. In this process, the importance of field competence may be less central that the capacity to apprehend the unknown, thereby contacting a new corporate culture. The quality of consulting or researching is beyond rationality: it requires the perception of verbal and nonverbal data provided by the members of the organization. The consultant or researcher should respect the foreign culture and notice its impact on him or herself as well as one's own impact on this new organizational system. In so doing, a continuous process of interpretation is embarked upon.
Knowing about facts in the organizational world may be useful. But it seems to be essential for researchers and counsellors to be able to ‘dive’ into the working world of the organizational members. Later they must be able to step outside of themselves and take an external position. From this point of view it is possible to watch the new corporate culture from a distance, see a structure and find a new form of understanding. It is a process of oscillating between the two positions: becoming involved in the stories of the organizational members and establishing a distance afterwards to achieve a clear, analytical position. This attitude can be referred to as ‘partial engagement,’ to be ‘in between’ without being entangled—a state of being a participant without becoming ensnared.

Of utmost importance is an attitude of respect for the system being studied and an approach as a partner in dialogue. It is suggested here that knowledge about organizations and their basic patterns cannot replace a childlike curiosity and sense of wonder. Insecurity and doubt can be helpful attitudes. If one does not question, if one takes a lot for granted as self-evident, it is not possible to gain new perspectives. The researcher becomes blind to the dynamics of the organization and loses interest in understanding the system.

To analyze basic patterns of organizations the researcher or consultant is wise to take an attitude of free-flowing awareness, just as in psychoanalytic therapy. This is important for avoiding the risk of an ‘I’ve-seen-it-all’ attitude, as Freud (1971) pointed out clearly:

One point will be fixed in his mind with particular clearness and some other will be correspondingly disregarded, and in making this selection he will be following his expectations or inclinations. This, however, is precisely what must not be done. In making the selection, if he follows his expectations he is in danger of never finding anything but what he already knows; and if he follows his inclinations he will certainly falsify what he may perceive. It must not be forgotten that the things one bears are for the most part things whose meaning is only recognized later on. (p.112)

Weick (1995) describes something analogous in the selection of patterns of interpretation. He argues:

To talk about sense-making is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creations. [...] If sense-making is viewed as an act of intention, then it is also possible to argue that the artefacts it produces include language, games and texts. (p.15)

He considers the selection process in the construction of narratives to be the main part of sense-making.

Sequencing is a powerful heuristic for sense-making. Because the essence of storytelling is sequencing, it is not surprising that stories are powerful stand alone contents for sense-making. Stories allow the clarity achieved in one small area to be extended to and imposed on an adjacent area that is less orderly. (p.129)
Weick denounces organization strategies as collective social defences. For him, organizational members make sense of their individual behaviour and feel they are acting mindfully according to the corporate policy in order to reduce their fear. This conscious effort leads to rationalisation and covers up the deeper patterns of conflicts.

Analyzing the corporate culture should not be – following the argument presented here - too strongly led by theory. Being cognitively prepared not only reduces the burden of coming into contact with the organization and its members, it also deprives the researcher or consultant of the opportunity to make new discoveries and arrive at new conclusions. The researcher or consultant, at the beginning of a research or consulting process, is in a state of principally and fundamentally not knowing (Obholzer, 1994). What is necessary for working in organizations in a psychodynamic manner is what Bion (1970) borrowing from Keats, called ‘negative capability’. This is a state of mind when ‘man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’ (Keats, 1817 cited in Bion, 1970).

Negative capability is, we believe the prerequisite for discovering something new in the organization, [and in oneself] something which no member of the institution may ever have realized or acknowledged before. The researcher or consultant has to sharpen his/her senses to the meaning of the unknown, the unseen, the avoided and the denied in the system. Pushing the organization too fast into a state of clarity is often caused by the consultant’s inability to withstand initial irritations. Clarity is the result of an intensive, mutual and occasionally hard-going search for meaning, not the prerequisite for the search.

Revealing the depth of dynamics in corporate conflict and the real informal structures can only be accomplished very slowly. The researcher or consultant needs time to take the risk of seeing, to reduce the social defences, and to loosen taboos and address censored issues.

The unconscious process of censoring affects both the researcher and the organization, which is why it is impossible to analyze an organization’s culture [only] through counting and measuring. Devereux (1974) says: It makes sense to see! Do not defend yourself from the challenges, things causing fear and depressive awareness. The type of organization determines whether archaic conflicts force the individual to activate his/her personal defences. Successful analysis of organizations can be helpful for individuals to reduce their barriers of defence, which impair their perception. To improve one’s perceptive capacity it is necessary to engage in a systematic process of self-reflection.

A major issue of a research process is the method of self-reflection in a critical hermeneutic manner.
From the very beginning a main theme in hermeneutics has been that the meaning of a part can only be understood if it is related to the whole. [...] In other words, you start at one point and then delve further and further into the matter by alternating between part and whole, which brings progressively deeper understanding of both (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000 p. 53).

Interestingly this oscillating process can be applied not only to the issue under investigation but also to the process of investigating the issue of investigation.

Methodological Perspectives

Using qualitative interviews is an approved and reliable approach for identifying cultural patterns in organizations. The manner of questioning itself is a process that constitutes meaning and therefore influences the outcome of the process. From this it follows that one possibility of perceiving rarely seen or heard phenomena is to use an unstructured or open form of questioning the issues under examination. The less the researcher or consultant is involved in making meaning while in the process of questioning, the greater the chance of revealing what has remained unseen or unheard.

The most open form of listening to somebody is given by inviting him or her to tell a story.

Ultimately [...] the truth of a story lies not in its accuracy but in its meaning – and paradoxically the inaccuracy, the distortion, or even the lie in a story can offer a path towards the deeper truth it contains, at an individual or collective level (Gabriel, 2000 p.135).

And if, as Weick and others have clearly shown, sense-making in and of organizations is achieved through the art of storytelling, it stands to reason that these stories should be collected.

Storytelling as a method is suited to collecting a comprehensive set of data for several reasons.

Circumstantial context-knowledge is embedded within the stories and carried along by telling them. Therefore it becomes available to the researcher. Furthermore one has to consider that

stories are able to evade censors, both internal and external, and express views and feelings which may be unacceptable in straight talk [...] Stories are seen as emotionally and symbolically charged narratives ... they enrich, enhance and infuse facts with meaning (Gabriel and Griffith, 2004 pp.114-5).

The complex and mostly unconscious system of interactions, human relations and communication, the specific 'models of reality' and 'cultural programs' of an organization
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are mirrored in stories and are elaborated through those stories. Through stories the – for most narrators implicit – knowledge is carried along. As a result of the interpretation by the researcher or consultant, this knowledge becomes visible. In order to gain a deep understanding of an organization the set of data -or in this research design, the gathering of stories – is crucial. Preferably very diverse perspectives within the organization should be heard. The general conditions have to ensure that the storytellers are able to establish sufficient confidence towards the position of the researcher or consultant.

One specific form of storytelling, the use of oral work biographies has proven to be especially beneficial. In the process, the storyteller follows his/her biography based on his/her specific career within the organization, naming the most important incidents. These events in turn are told as stories so that the ‘context-knowledge’ is carried along. An enumeration of happenings in the form of a report should be avoided. If necessary the researcher has to use triggers to facilitate the telling of stories. If then all the collected stories are matched, a pattern may arise. This blueprint may, in a following step, allow the researcher to identify mental models, normative textures and other aspects of corporate culture, depending on the focus of the research or project.

At this point I would like to make accessible a method enabling the disclosure of these patterns as an adequate and compatible way of dealing both with the relevant issue and the way of questioning it. The introduced method is based on the fantasy-word method of Lloyd deMause, a psychohistorian.

The Psychohistory

In the field of social historians deMause offers an alternative frame of comprehension, which is based on psychoanalytical methods and therefore is an alternative to classical sociological perspectives. He approaches the issue of the historical motivation of cultural phenomena by dedicating himself to the reconstruction of the life-story of the historical subject.

Social scientists have rarely been interested in psychology. Using the model of Newtonian physics, they have usually depicted individuals as opaque billiard balls bouncing off each other. That individuals might have their own complex internal motivations for the way they act in society – that they have emotions that affect their social behaviour – has rarely been acknowledged. The most interesting question about any group, one which we asked even as children – ‘Why are they doing that?’ – is rarely asked in academia (de Mause 2002).

One example of using the psychohistory is the question of how far the similarities of traumatic experiences are historically relevant. It is therefore possible to investigate the
impact trauma had on the Jewish children who in the thirteenth century escaped a largescale, planned act of genocide and later were united again with their Jewish communities. deMause stresses that the material reality is firstly to be seen as the result of conscious or unconscious decisions. Following his arguments the elements of individuals and groups commonly described as ‘psychic’ are a substantial part of the decision-making process. The accurate examination of these elements leads to a ‘Psychology of Society’ and the possibility of approaching the ‘Why’. Besides focussing on deMause’s history of childhood, his work on group and national fantasies is becoming increasingly interesting for the field of psychohistory.

The fantasy-word method by Lloyd deMause

The difficulty of access to the research subject forced deMause to dedicate himself to the development of adequate methods to approach this topic. He also emphasizes the necessity of conscious immersion into our own psyche while researching. He sees man as a ‘homo relatans’ 1, as a being defined by relationships and love. For psychohistorians, changes in history are the result of human relationships among human beings who are acting as ‘homo relatans’. Psychohistory pursues a methodology of discovery, which attempts to solve the problems of historical motivation through a mixture of historical documentation, clinical experiences, and the use of the researchers’ emotions as the decisive research instrument. Accordingly, deMause sees empathy and subjective involvement as formative qualities of his research work. He points out that this method is not recommended for researchers or counsellors lacking in self-reflective skills. Our discovery of exterior conditions is wholly dependent on how much we can strip away of our interior defences against recognition of what we are doing all the time. 2

The application of psychoanalytic methods to questions of the psychodynamics of larger groups makes it possible to arrive at answers beyond the ever so active superego of the individual. deMause argues that we all know something, and yet no one knows it. There are psychological explanations for all group phenomena: people act in groups in a way other than they act as individuals because they separate themselves from parts of their inner conflicts as a defence strategy, not because some power of society influences them. Through the disappearance of the eternal entity ‘society’, all group values reveal themselves to be temporary and are subject to change with each new generation. According to deMause continuity not change, is problematic. Group fantasies are created to give the individual the possibility of taking on roles that may protect him/her from childhood fantasies. Leaders, for example, are personalities who are able to absorb the bizarre projected identifications of group fantasies.
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Revealing the action-causing unconscious mind in the group that does not directly reach the conscious level of the individual is the goal of research by Lloyd deMause. His methods are, therefore, also relevant for research into company cultures, i.e. into the mental models and behaviour norms 'woven into' the stories of organisations. Through his fantasy-word method, deMause is offering an evaluation tool that will enable access to the company culture.

Because our discoveries about external conditions are dependent upon the degree of internal defence, we have to break through this defence in order to see more. The goal of the fantasy-word method is to use emotional identification skills deliberately in each step of the research. 'Taming and neutralisation efforts' typical of objective methodology can be denounced in this context as defence manoeuvres. Researchers and counsellors in this method abstain from diving into the 'otherness'. The capacity to engage in 'otherness' is influenced by the researcher's or counsellor's own life story.

In the deMause method historical material or taped recordings of speeches, lectures or meetings are first read to find out the obvious content and what the person said about the 'real' happenings. The verbal data is read once more, with a focus on emotionally loaded words. It is essential to switch to this focus to gain insight into the fantasy content. Only metaphors, figures of speech, emotional expressions, sayings accentuated by body language, repetitions, and symbolic terms are noted for a subsequent check of thematic content. The fantasy content amounts to barely ten percent of the data and may be accessed by following eight rules.

1. Record all metaphors and similes, regardless of context.
2. Record all body language, strong feeling tones, and strong emotional states.
3. Record all repetitive, unusual or gratuitous word usages.
4. Record any obviously symbolic terms, especially political terms, like flags and such, but also including familial imagery or any other overtly symbolic phrases.
5. Eliminate all negatives.
6. Record all overt group responses, laughter, moments of relaxation in meetings, breaks, asides, tense silences, and so on, wherever possible.
7. Note any long periods of no imagery.

The capacity to engage in 'otherness' is influenced by the researcher's or counsellor's own life story.
Evaluation example

A speech by Ronald Reagan, evaluated through this method reads as follows:
'mess...out of control...runaway like radioactivity...out of control...wars...run out of voice and breath...freeze...freeze cuts...cuts...cuts expended...unleash...out of control...stalled...judgment day...shattered'

deMause comments on the data as follows:
We feel like a mess, out of control, runaway, like radioactivity. We are so out of control that, as in a war, we are out of breath and freezing. We must cut someone or we'll explode and unleash our out-of-control rage, which, if not stalled now, will produce a final judgment day which will leave us shattered 5 (de Mause, 1984 p.4).

As this example illustrates, new associations and themes emerge with the help of this technique. An examination of fantasy words reveals numerous images and themes implicit in the speech. To reveal the latent text, the researcher or counsellor should avoid being constrained by any one pattern and pay equal attention to each part of the text. The phenomena must be accounted for without restricting blinders, which includes abandoning any theoretical approach to the data. By taking on an attitude of neutrality uninfluenced by assumptions the researcher is able to ensure equal attention unrestricted by concepts or facts. Unconscious processes may come to light. The free-floating awareness of the researcher or consultant allows the transient unconscious phenomena to come to the surface. The unconscious phenomena are flighty; they appear and disappear quickly and are difficult to capture.

This attempt to establish an authentic relationship with the material through one's own subjectivity means that the researcher or consultant will react both emotionally and rationally. By engaging in the material, the researcher reacts with irritation, disgust, surprise, and pleasure, and must notice these reactions in detail to understand the cultural structures within the context of that expression.

Adaptation of the fantasy-word method for Consultation/Research

This approach is accessible for researchers or consultants trained in psychoanalysis or other deeply reflective disciplines; others may soon feel overwhelmed. Hence, in using this method with student researchers, the option was to think about variations of evaluation. Accordingly, we were testing new methods with a group of young researchers. The methods turned out to be extraordinarily effective. The researchers' interpretations and depth of knowledge were strongly confirmed by their interview partners in follow-up presentations.
A research project questioning practical ethics in organisations made it necessary to
detect the relevant organisational culture. We gained access to the culture through work
biography interviews as described above. These were transcribed and first examined for
their evident content, as proposed by deMause. In the second step, the interviews were
read again and all words as well as word groups activating an emotional stimulus were
identified. After that, word lists of the items were made to separate them from the original
transcript in order to avoid bias (Møller, 1997). Using these separate lists of the emotionally
loaded words and word groups, the researchers focus on the resonances and feelings in
this list and wait for a gestalt to emerge. At this stage, the researchers feel the resonances
of the words and word groups and a gestalt emerges in and of itself. In the last step, the
researchers create a fantasy story based on the word-list.

In the example reported here, three researchers at a time conducted six interviews.
Each interview was read by each researcher. It was handled as described above. The group
then assembled and all told their stories (a meta-story). Keywords for the elaboration of a
new process of storytelling were collected from these. They were again evaluated and used
until a new meta-meta story resulted.

A meta-meta story might then, for example, look like this:

- It's floating through the room. Like all the others. A shooting star is racing past. At times, the moon is
  smiling, sometime crying. The space-crafts are gliding elegantly, a gentle up and down, like waves.
- Like a school of jelly-fish. A smooth glide, rhythmic. One with lost steering. It wobbles, it adjusts, it
  mutates into nothing, into eternity.
- I'm putting my hand on the door. I'm feeling the vibration, the beating. Agitated, new. Intravenous
  caffeine...
- I'm checking my feelings: Fear, I'm feeling the inner scream. But, I cannot resist the temptation. I'm
  already being absorbed by the resulting mainstream. The way out leads inside. One instant, seconds
  like hours. One thousand gazes weighing me down, embarrassment. One thousand voices weighing
  me down. Am becoming transparent. They are looking through me and, through them, I'm behavior
  as they do. I am acting as they do. Or like them. Knocking beats, whirring drifting, hectic mood,
  hysters... I'm forcing my way through. I'm feeling the sweat. My heart-beat is one with the beat.
- The beats are transgressing onto the ship, are changing course. I'm crossing the room like a puppet
  on a string. A smiling smile is touching me, whispering, I'm returning a smiling smile. I'm caught.
- A new door? There are several. I'm choosing this one today. Another way? Security...quiet music,
  family, gifts... a feeling like Christmas. I'm accepting the band with gratitude, I'm adapting...
- Uncomplicated. Safety, confidence. Everybody is forming a circle around the tree. Tick, Tick, Tick.
  The time has run out. Kindly everybody disembark.
The door is opening. Spit out again. New experiences gained, new limits learned, new depths seen. I'm pausing, I'm thinking, I'm smiling amused. Sunrise on the horizon. I'm breaking out into laughter. It has not sunk; it's still gliding on our way towards destinations hidden from me. It's teasing, a new affair is beginning.

This meta-meta story then is interpreted paragraph by paragraph in regard to organizational patterns. The following is a passage of interpretation taken out of the meta-meta story for in-depth interpretation.

My heart-beat is one with the beat. The beats are transgressing onto the ship, are changing course. I'm crossing the room like a puppet on a string.

This section has been interpreted as follows:

Not the captain is steering the ship, but the DJ defines the rhythm and the beat. 'My heart-beat is one with the beat' expresses that the co-workers are becoming the company. They decide on the direction to go, the beats are transfused to the ship and change its course. Nevertheless they are like 'puppets', as the DJ, the informal leader of the company, chooses where to go. Even though the co-workers have a certain influence on the music that is played and can partly affect the rhythm, they become one with the beat over and over again. The captain/leader can only watch what is happening as an observer and is not able to change the course of the ship by himself. He is being affected by the rhythm and the guidelines of the DJ/informal leader. 6

In our research, this interpretation was communicated to the owner of the company as feedback. He was highly astonished that such an analysis was possible by using only the statements from the work biographies of his co-workers. He told us the background for the stories. One co-worker, who was related to the company owner and an heir, had therefore a strong informal impact on the strategies of the business. None of the employees knew about the relationship. As a result of the entanglement, the company owner felt helpless in many situations. He told the researchers that this had at no point been an issue in the company. He was certain that the co-workers could not consciously have known about these facts.

Finally in our process, the individual groups of young researchers presented their findings during a workshop. Interestingly similar findings were observable while interpreting different parts of the meta-meta story. At the beginning of the project the young researchers, all students of business administration, had expressed deep concerns about the method and had to overcome deep inner resistance. Even they were astonished about the effectiveness of the method in gathering deep insights about the culture of the company studied. The research project may be read as a story itself, one in which the collective defences of the business administration culture were reduced.
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References


Endnotes


2 ibid., p.103

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6 We want to thank Gunnar Bremer, Stefanie Sommerauer and Simone Zanon for leaving us their work.

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