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The ethnonarrative approach

Hans Hansen

ABSTRACT   While much research within narrative theory has focused on discourse in organizations, context should be a central focus because it is material in the production of meaning. In this article, I suggest an ethnonarrative approach that seeks to combine ethnographic methods and narrative methods in conducting hermeneutic analyses of narratives and stories, shifting not only between texts and contexts, but texts within a context of construction. Narrative research relies on analysis of various texts and often ignores context, while ethnographic methods are especially attuned to making observations and interpretations regarding the context in which texts are produced. The ethnonarrative approach highlights the multiple materials at play in narrative construction and attempts to demonstrate contextual influence on meaning making. The ethnonarrative approach is distinguished by a focus on the context of construction, the endosymbiotic relationship between text/context, and the social act as the level of analysis.

We make sense of our lives by creating narratives that explain our experiences. In doing so, we are constructing subjective realities about what happened, what is, and what will be. Narratives provide meaning by describing and creating the relationship between ideas which we act on. A narrative plot connects a series of actions and provides the rationale and

1049

expectations regarding those actions. Narrative theory stresses the role language plays in these processes, focusing on how people use discourse to build understandings and representations, make sense of their work lives, and to organize, interpret and influence each others' actions. We examine discourse to gain insight into the 'rationale' behind the lines-of-action we construct and enact, not to determine whether the statements are 'true' or not. Narrative analysis is a search for meaning, not truth.

If we want insight into why people act and think they way they do in organizations and what is meaningful to them, then the narratives constructed and used by a particular group can be revealing. Organizations themselves emerge through discourses that are continuously 'in the making' (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). The discourse that makes up a coherent narrative is usually studied by examining the various talk and texts in and around organizations.

But focus on talk is insufficient (Hardy et al., 1998). While organizations are made up of discourses, discourse is not the only material used to make meaning, and discursive understandings are not the only understandings people act on in organizations. Discursive understandings are those that have been made explicit, but many understandings remain at the tacit level (Polanyi, 1967) as unspoken assumptions that actively guide behavior. While we can gain insight into discourse by examining texts, how do we gain insight into non-discursive material, such as tacit assumptions that are present in organizations and used in meaning making just as often as text? Ethnography offers a methodology that aims to make tacit or cultural knowledge more explicit via contextual description. By examining the contexts where texts are produced, we can make inferences into the role that non-discursive materials play in meaning making. Even if meanings are represented in language, this is not to say that language is the sole constituent of meaning. If our focus is on the construction of meaning in organizations we must attend to the construction site, or context.

In addition to interpreting the talk and texts generated by organizational discourse, narrative research benefits from empirical analysis of the *context of construction*. This contention is the starting point for introducing the ethnonarrative approach presented here. The context of construction refers to the particular space (both the symbolic and natural settings) where people engage in meaning making. One assumption of the ethnonarrative approach is that two materials are involved in constructing and representing reality via narratives:

1)   The *discourses* that both represent and construct organizational understandings.

2)   The *context* in which, and by which, those understandings are constructed and enacted.

Getting at those two materials require different methods. While narrative research has favored discursive texts and has too often ignored context, the ethnonarrative approach calls for more than simply 'bringing in context' by combining narrative and ethnographic approaches. The ethnonarrative approach calls for new methods and entails a distinct conceptualization of text/context and way of working with data that reflect advances and movements in our conceptions of meaning making processes. The ethnonarrative approach views text/context as endosymbiotic, calls for reflexive-hermeneutic shifts between text and context in describing and interpreting the meaning making materials at play during the construction processes, and considers the social act as the level of analysis.

After reviewing some assumptions in narrative theory (and discourse studies), I define text and context and discuss the current organizational research methods used to attend to each and explore why they have not been combined more deliberately. I then offer a categorization of narrative approaches based on their treatment of text/context, introducing the ethnonarrative approach and describing the three concepts that make it a distinct approach to organizational studies. I then provide a short empirical example to demonstrate how researchers might conduct ethnonarrative research and discuss the implications of taking the ethnonarrative approach.

Narrative theory and discourse studies

Narrative theory and discourse studies share much terrain. Both are associated with a study of how texts create meaning (Gephart, 1993) and contend that meaning is socially constructed (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991, 1995; Boyce, 1995; Feldman, 1990; Smircich, 1983; Wilkins, 1984) via symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969). Since meanings are made explicit in language, discourse is central. The focus is on talk as a constructive device, whereby people learn to speak discourses that structure their worlds and provides them a place and way of being (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). But discursively produced meaning is contested and fleeting. Organizations are sites of struggle where different groups participate in joint construction (Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Hardy et al., 2000), and compete to shape the social reality of organizations in ways that serve their own interests (Mumby & Clair, 1997). Organizational texts are ongoing constructions of meaning, constantly changing from one participant to another and one context to

another (Gabriel, 1991). Narratives do not 'possess' meaning; instead, their meanings are supported and contested through the continuous production of texts (Boje, 1995).

The assumption of discursively constructed reality entails two positions. One is that discourse can represent meaning, and the other is that discourse creates meaning. Discourse represents, pointing to and referring to things, but discourse can also create the things themselves (ideas, concepts, the meaning of objects and experience, etc.). Watson (2000a) calls these the 'soft' (represents reality) and 'hard' (creates reality) approaches to discourse. Discourse can be used to build particularly strong representations because 'organizational narratives capture organizational life in a way that no compilation of facts ever can; this is because they are carriers of life itself, not just "reports" on it' (Czarniawska, 1997: 21). The harder constructionist assumption is that discourse does not simply mirror social reality; but creates it (Hardy et al., 2000), working as 'a structuring, constituting force, directly implying or tightly framing subjectivity, practice and meaning' (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000: 1145). More than creating a subjective interpretation by using narrative to represent some experience, thus 'making' an understanding of an experience, narratives are used to build and constitute organizational reality in a real sense, with concrete outcomes (Watson, 2000a) where talk produces concepts that we enact into being. Discourse both evokes and invokes reality.

While organizations only exist in so far as we create them through discourse (Mumby & Clair, 1997), this is not to claim that organizations are 'nothing but' discourse (Watson, 2000a). Rather, discourse is the principal means by which members create any coherence. Constructing narratives is then a primary means of organizing. Most narrative approaches emphasize the simultaneous presence of multiple, subjective, interlinked realities, and attempt to capture the diversity and complexity of competing discourses. Critical perspectives reveal how discourse builds realities that legitimize power structures. *Human Relations* (2000, 53[9]) devoted a special issue to organizational discourse, which serves as an excellent survey of the field for those interested in further discussion.

Defining text/context and methods of inquiry

That we produce meanings discursively through 'spoken dialogue' is well established, but my contention is that we also produce meaning with non-discursive but contextually-present materials as well. In this section, I will define these two broad classes of materials that make up narratives and the

general means by which organizational studies have attended to them. Discourses can only be explored by analyzing the texts that comprise them (Phillips et al., 2004), while context can be explored using ethnographic methods. The purpose is to suggest that narrative and ethnographic methods should be used in conjunction, and question why (especially since they share many assumptions) ethnographic methods seem to have been left by the roadside when organizational studies made a linguistic turn.

Text/context

Seeing the world-as-text was introduced into organizational studies by Derrida (1976) and the assumption that there is no 'outside the text' has focused attention solely on text as a data source. Postmodern approaches in particular take the view that there is nothing outside the text (Martin & Frost, 1996). Broadly, discourses are made up of structured texts (Parker, 1992), such as speech utterances captured in recorded conversation during organizational interaction such as meetings, informal discussion, and interviews. I stick with a broad view of text that includes both talk and written texts, such that text is synonymous with discourse. A special issue of *Organization* (2004, 11[3]) provides several perspectives on what texts do or textual agency.

Context can be defined in two senses. In one sense, inspired by the 'world as text' assumption, context is merely a text where we find other texts, a 'larger' text surrounding a specific text under scrutiny, as in a 'conversation' that produces a 'text.' In a second sense, context is separate from text and includes non-textual or para-textual elements in natural or symbolic spaces. This definition highlights the non-discursive material in a context that surrounds and influences discourse. Foucault (1986) reminds us that we do not live in homogeneous and empty space, but a space thoroughly imbued with quantities and qualities. As a symbolic space, context includes the aesthetic, tacit, or unspoken implicit feelings embedded in settings, objects, or social interactions. Defined in the first sense, the implication is that textual analysis alone will suffice. In the second sense, context as space, we refer to the context typically explored and described by trained ethnographers.

With either definition, the assumption is that context is something separate from text that provides additional meaning to text. The related assumption is that context surrounds text. This also implies that context is relatively stable compared to text, which allows any text a margin of play, of difference that opens up possibility of new interpretations within some context (Kilduff & Mehra, 1997). Finally, the prefix *con-* also indicates

union, such that a text is never without some context. Even when we read an ancient text, we recognize that some particular context influenced that text's production, just as our present circumstances influence our interpretations. Whether we take the sense of context-as-text or context-as-space, both share three common elements. Contexts *surround* and are *separate* from a particular text, yet remain locked in *union*. I introduce the term *endosymbiotic* to describe these seemingly paradoxical notions of a context that surrounds, is separate from, while in union with, text.

Context as a natural or symbolic space where meaning (discursive included) is produced is what I refer to as the '*context of construction*'. The context of construction is the proximate context that includes the immediate features of interaction (Hardy, 2004); both explicit, discursively produced meaning as well as implicit, tacit understandings that factor into meaning making and interpretation. The problem with the 'all is text' definition is that not all of the influences of a particular text's production are evident in the text itself. Cultural or tacit knowledges may be evoked in meaning making but never manifested in discourse.

Like discourse, context does things. There is always a context of construction that influences, and helps explain the motivation and agenda in narrative constructions. This constructionist view of context includes the backdrop, the organizational setting, and situation in which discursive action takes place. Context provides us with an index to help interpret the texts, limiting the number of meanings and pointing to more plausible interpretations of text (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992).

Context is a negotiated space that includes some discourses and excludes others, determining to what extent an organization is a site of competing discourses. If contextual boundaries are drawn around single discourse, then discourse becomes totalizing. If context is drawn broadly, we approach pluralism.

This perspective of context as both subjective and 'treated as' objective calls for some 'ontological oscillation' (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 266). 'Organizational researchers engage in oscillation when they attempt to show how the supposedly hard, concrete, tangible aspects of organizational life are dependent on subjective constructions, but then smuggle in realist assumptions that posit constraints and objects that exist independently of subjective constructions' (Weick, 1995: 34).

Interpreting text

Narrative research involves the collection and analysis of various organizational texts with the aim of making inferences about organizational life

(Fairclough, 1992). The collection of textual data ranges from organizational discourse captured through interviews to various printed materials such as strategic plans, corporate histories, mission and vision statements, and other artifacts. The researcher might ask an organizational member to tell a story, perhaps describing an event that the organizational member thinks representative of some organizational value or practice.

Textual analysis spans an array of methodologies that includes conversation analysis, ethnomethodology, and critical discourse analysis (Boje et al., 2004), but here I will focus on commonly used narrative methods, which usually involves some type of discourse analysis or systemic study of the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts in exploring the relationship between discourse and social reality (Phillips et al., 2004). Researchers make hermeneutic shifts between texts, looking for underlying assumptions or inconsistencies. They are conscious of how texts reveal organizational values and policy, or the dualities in the data, such as what is branded as 'good' versus 'bad' in company lore (Boje, 2001).

Interpreting context

Beside the explicit knowledge constructed by and represented in texts, we also rely and act on implicit, tacit level knowledge. Tacit level knowledge resists explicit, discursive description (Langer, 1942). While discursive practices do constitute meaning making, once brought to the explicit level, discourse is often only a shadow of the phenomenological experience. So discourse constitutes and represents, but how well it represents is up for debate. Much of our cultural knowledge resides at the tacit level, but we can make inferences into tacit meaning by examining context in addition to text.

Ethnography provides methods particularly attuned to making inferences into context. A full review of ethnography is readily available elsewhere, so the point to be made here is simply that ethnography provides a methodology that captures context (Geertz, 1973). Knowledge about a particular context of construction gives us insight and empirical evidence into: 1) non-discursive material or cultural understandings that exist at the tacit level, and 2) understandings represented by voices that were present in the discourse during construction but have been marginalized or hegemonically silenced in organizational texts. Ethnonarrative relies on ethnographic methods to get at phenomena that is outside of the organizational discourse, but is material (in both senses of the word) in meaning making.

Ethnography refers to the study of the culture, and makes cultural inferences by observing and analyzing behavior (including discursive action) and cultural artifacts, recognizing that texts only make the sense they do

because of the cultural context in which they are embedded. One of ethnography's major aims has been to represent the research context so that the reader might achieve insights into the 'subjects' world' in addition to hearing members describe their reality 'in their own words.' Ethnographers make an effort to understand the native's point of view (Malinowski, 1922) through participation in their context, producing cultural interpretations through intense research experience (Clifford & Marcus, 1986), seeking to capture understandings of interpersonal processes such as the negotiation of, and the social construction of, meaning. A focus on the production of cultural contexts entails a description of how contexts come into being and how they influence meaning making and action.

If discourse studies see the world as text, then ethnography sees the world as context. Contextual analysis relies on description of the setting where social acts take place to gain insight into member meaning and understanding (Spradley, 1980). Ethnography calls for long-term participant observation in order to allow the researcher to provide a thick description (Geertz, 1973) of the organizational context, and provide a reader with the sense that the author has 'been there' and presents a 'realistic' (Van Maanen, 1988) portrait of the members' view of the work place. Participant observation and in-depth interviews are used in combination to get at the cultural understandings and assumptions operating in a particular context. The ethnographer relies on thick contextual descriptions to provide a sense of what it is like 'to be there,' but the real purpose of the ethnographic text is to convince the reader that the researcher 'has been there' and is privy to cultural or contextual knowledge, and even shares it since they participated in its construction (cf. Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1993; Van Maanen, 1988). Demonstrating all this contextual knowledge is meant to give the reader confidence that the researcher interprets discursive actions (relying on cultural knowledge they share but cannot fully express in the text) in the same way organizational members do, so you can trust the researcher's interpretation because they have 'been there' and share the members' view, and are able to use their unseen contextual knowledge to help explain the text.

Bringing discourse studies and ethnography together in narrative research

Given that context and text are so closely interrelated when it comes to meaning making, it is ironic to see them attended to via different methods that are rarely combined. In general, narrative studies extract from text and ethnography extracts from context. Approaches that seek to explore the

meaning of narratives in context would do well to combine methods, but to date most narrative research favors textual data over contextual or ethnographic data (Czarniawska, 1997).

So what explains the puzzle as to why narrative studies have marginalized context? One explanation is that they have simply overlooked the importance of the context of construction as a constitutional force. Perhaps this over-reliance on discourse is a remnant of Derrida's preoccupation with written texts (Giddens, 1987). Texts are also easier to collect and share with readers. Maybe the problem is ethnography's historically schizophrenic view of reality, with roots in realist approaches seeking to discover a single underlying objective reality; while narrative theory emerged from well within the interpretive paradigm and is more often associated with critical and postmodern approaches. Perhaps the general linguistic turn in organizational studies has steered narrative research closer to discourse studies. Then again, maybe ethnography is just on the outs (Bate, 1997). Despite recognition that nearly all meaning is contextualized, inquiry into specific contexts, and not merely the texts that come from them, seems to be waning.

This is not to say that narrative completely ignores context or that ethnography does not focus on talk. While there is much overlap in these methods, there has been no little effort to use them deliberately in a manner that reflects the close interrelationship that text/context have in meaning making. Doing so will require a unique approach that entails distinct assumptions about the relationship between text and context, the level of analysis, and mode of engagement with data. Laying out these distinct conceptualizations and methods is the motivation behind introducing the ethnonarrative approach.

There is solid theoretical ground and practical reason for linking narrative and ethnography. In introducing the narrative mode of thinking, Bruner (1986) emphasized that narrative was context sensitive. Czarniawska (1997) notes that organizational narratives are the result of a constructive process where narrative and organizational culture theory overlap. She traces a narrative view of social action that is constructionist and informed by assumptions from symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1984) that have been transported into organizational studies by Van Maanen (1988, 1991). The link is made explicit by recognizing that narrative can 'generate unusual insights by bringing organizational studies closer to cultural studies' (Czarniawska, 1997: 5). Since narrative construction is a sensemaking process that is best researched in situ (Boje, 2001), there is a strong link between narrative concepts and the strength of ethnography in observing social and symbolic interaction.

Hatch and Schultz (2000) call for ethnographic methods in narrative

research, but the combination has been rare. Several studies have observed discourse-in-use which calls for some mix of ethnographic and narrative methods (Barge, 2004; Helmer, 1993; Tracy, 2000; Trethewey, 2001). While they are all sensitive to context and how it provides insight into discourse, context is not treated as a constitutional. What they do demonstrate is that ethnographic and narrative methods complement each other and contextual analysis makes for richer interpretations of text.

Discourse analysis involves a sophisticated search for meaning in texts, while ethnography involves a sophisticated search for meaning in context. Where discourse analysis and deconstruction can ferret out contested meanings, ethnography reveals collective understandings. Narrative tends to reveal motives and causal relationships, showing how discourses are woven together to fulfill specific agendas and focuses on the reception of sensegiving. Ethnography is more descriptive, demonstrating how, and which, underlying assumptions are employed in constructing lines of joint action. Czarniawska (1997) highlights the role of context in narrative analysis, explaining that narrative sensemaking consists of integrating events into plots, whereby they become understandable only in relation to the context where the events happened. One of the strengths of ethnography is that it involves putting people back in social settings, back into the contexts in which the action took place, recognizing that 'thought and behavior cannot be properly understood outside of the context in which they are situated; it is knowledge of context that renders them intelligible' (Bate, 1997: 1156).

Three constructionist approaches to text/context

Having defined text and context and how they are generally approached in organizational narrative and discourse studies, I offer a categorization of three general approaches to text/context within the constructionist camp. Figure 1 represents what type of data each approach relies on to get at meaning. For example, discursive action relies on text alone to generate interpretations. All the approaches assume discourse is constructive, but vary on the role context plays in the meaning making process. The discursive action approach takes the word-as-text view and ignores context, while the situated discourse approach acknowledges that context has an influential but moderating role in aiding textual interpretation. The ethnonarrative approach, the approach I seek to formalize, considers the context of construction to be just as constitutive as text in meaning making. I also outline the three assumptions that make the ethnonarrative approach a distinct approach in organizational studies: the focus on the context of
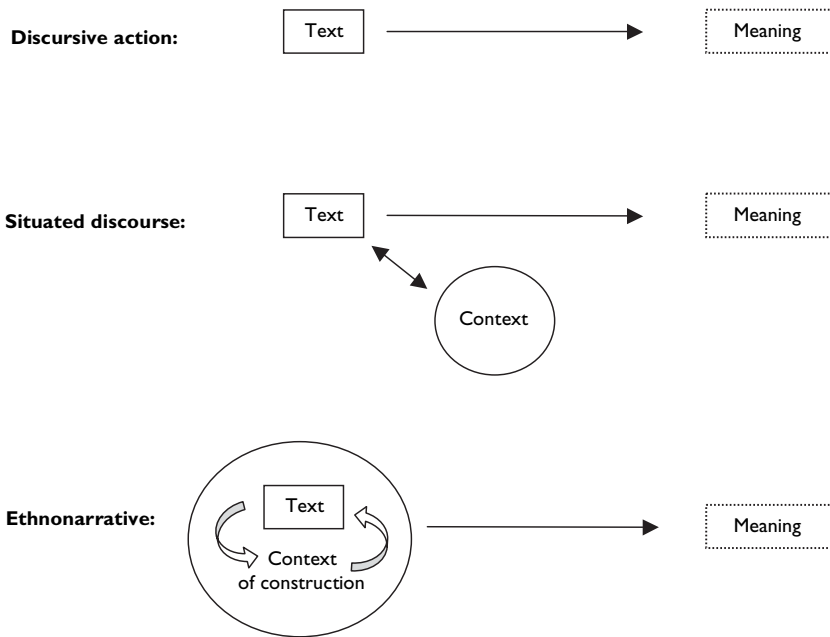
Figure 1 Three approaches to discourse and context

construction, a conceptualization of text/context as endosymbiotic, and the social act as the level of analysis.

Discursive action

The discursive action approach takes the 'world-as-text' view and goes no further than the texts that constitute reality to get at meaning. Organizational studies that take this approach are concerned with the production, distribution, and consumption of particular texts. To the extent that context is considered, it becomes nothing more than 'another text' that surrounds a text under scrutiny, and any contextual description comes from analysis of texts. For example, you might conduct discourse analysis on an employee handbook and conclude that 'this text came from a context where dissention is not tolerated.' While this may certainly be a plausible interpretation, it is a limiting view.

Alvesson and Karreman apply a discursive action approach in using the concept of a 'ladder of discourse' (2000: 1139). This basically involves moving from 'little d' to 'Big D,' from a micro-discursive level where they 'read the account as a text' and then move up to a meso-discourse level to

look for broader themes in discourse, finishing on a mega-discourse level where the account is read as a Discourse of 'anti-managerialism, discontent and subtle protests against its domination and moral problems' (2000: 1143).

Trethewey (2001), for example, focuses on individual women's discursive reproduction and resistance of aging within the larger context of a master narrative of decline, or 'little d' within a 'Big D.' O'Connor (1995) provides an example of research strictly relying on written texts alone. In fact, she goes to great lengths to avoid any contextual contamination of her research texts. She 'stopped by one day and picked up the texts; and about three months later . . . stopped by and dropped off a paper.' No 'interviews, surveys, nor informal conversations were conducted with members of the organization' (1995: 775). In investigating a change process solely through the organization's documentation of it, she focused on 'the role of language, symbols and sign systems and the process of their interpretation' (1995: 773).

Situated discourse

In this approach, context is considered, but the star is still text while context is relegated to a supporting role. Text and context are put into an odd juxtaposition where text is constructionist but context is representational. To use Watson's (2000a) terms, text is 'hard' but context is 'soft.' Text is seen as 'situated' or 'embedded' in more stable context that acts as a frame for textual production. While the concept is of a text 'situated' within a context, in working with data context is actually treated as if it were detached and distanced from text (see Figure 1). Context is used as a stable reference to help interpret a dynamic text. Text still stands alone as a construction material and 'points to' a context that is 'out there' informing textual interpretation. Research here invokes (calls on it) but never evokes (makes it appear) context.

For example, critical discourse analysis (cf. Fairclough, 1992) situates discourse within a social context and calls for an analysis that integrates both text and context into interpretations of meaning. Researchers focus on a particular text or discursive practice, and examine the text as a reflection of a social context. Hardy et al. (2000) attend to context in exploring how discursive action is embedded within broader frameworks of understanding, noting that discursive activity should be studied in light of its local, global, social, and cultural contexts. Ng and De Cock (2002), for example, rely on contextual information to demonstrate that powerful voices silence others in building an organizational reality that reflects management's agenda. While all these are welcomed examples of intertextual analysis (Grant et al., 2001;

van Dijk, 1997), context is treated as stable frame of reference shedding light on a text that is still the main material used to construct social reality.

Recent examples of situated discourse approaches include Sims (2003) and Currie and Brown (2003). Sims takes a narrative approach similar to Watson's (2000b) by constructing fictional but representative vignettes based on all of his discursive data. While Sims did capture discourse-in-use, he does not describe context beyond the broad sense of context where 'middle managers' operate. Sims points to context from 'within the text' to indicate the situation where managers were using text to meet various agendas. Currie and Brown (2003) explore how collectives make sense of reality through constructing negotiated narratives. They conducted 57 audio-taped interviews to collect discursive data which were 'supplemented by observations made when shadowing middle managers at work over four full days' (Currie & Brown, 2003: 567). They also took Watson's lead (2000b) and presented two group narratives, pieced together from narrative fragments into a coherent representation that represented all their data.

I fully approve of these fiction-based presentation styles, and there is no doubt that four days of observation would allow a richer understanding of the processes at their research site, but these research examples definitely demonstrate a turn from having 'been there' toward having 'heard that.' Both these examples amount to 'context via documentation' as opposed to 'context via observation.' None of the approaches so far have relied on ethnography to get at a context that contains non-discursive material that is used in reality construction. Currie and Brown (2003: 583) went so far with their four full days as to claim that '. . . two "tales of the field" (Van Maanen, 1988) have been represented . . .'. A more accurate description would be 'tales of the tape.' One Sims (2003) example highlights all of the understanding we stand to miss by focusing on discourse alone or reports on context instead of contextual observation. Sims offers a narrative account of a manager who is 'swamped by activities,' but none that merit a 'narrative twist.'

> Well I didn't really do anything yesterday – you know – just stuff. You know, there's all the things that I could be doing to create a better hospital and all that, and all I was doing was just stuff.
>
> (Sims, 2003: 1205)

Sims points out that managers can dismiss 'a whole lot' of activities as unworthy of narrative construction efforts. Perhaps in the managers' judgment the meanings and activities are too mundane and too everyday to be put into discourse, but imagine the pages and pages that rigorous ethnographic methods could have produced in observation of the everyday and

the mundane. What if Van Maanen had relied solely on police narratives and their descriptions of context instead of long-term participant observation?

> Van Maanen: 'What happened out on patrol today?'
> Officer: 'Not much. The usual . . .'
> Van Maanen: 'Well what *usually* happens?'
> Officer: 'Just stuff.'

There are two examples of movement toward an ethnonarrative approach. Heracleous and Barrett (2001) employed 'rhetorical-hermeneutic discourse analysis' emphasizing an iterative journey of discovery by reconsidering texts within the context of the whole, and at the same time, the context of the whole as manifested in texts. In their methodology, they moved between textual interpretation and reflexive interpretation and relied on their knowledge of the setting to allow them to discern hidden assumptions, understandings, and values that guided behavior. Heracleous and Marshak (2004) conceptualize organizational discourse as 'situated action' and point out the irony of a concept of discourse as action without attending to context. They are explicit in stating that context does influence constructions, arguing that approaches that have a narrow or exclusive focus on the text are unsuited to address the contextual aspects within which text circulate. They characterize their method as 'action research in a naturally occurring setting' rather than ethnography, but they were sensitive to 'participants' real experience as it was happening' and had access to 'contextualized and live organizational settings' (Heracleous & Marshak, 2004: 1293). They approached their observation as an episode in which one of the authors helped facilitate a five hour meeting to discuss a new business model, and they described the organization's wider historical context to inform what was occurring in the immediate context of production. This work is a step forward because they engaged text within a specific 'context of construction.' Though neither of these examples includes ethnographic components, it pushes toward ethnonarrative because they recognize a constructionist context and the way they work with text/context represents an endosymbiotic conceptualization.

Ethnonarrative

In the ethnonarrative approach, both text and context are construction material, so it calls for a focus on the local context of construction and uses ethnographic methods to make inferences into how context generates meaning. While we know cultures primarily through language, for example,

culture is also evident in artifacts, rituals, art, customs, the layout and decoration of buildings, etc., so observation is broader than discourse (Watson, 1994). Even though meanings may eventually be represented in language, this is not to say that the reality consists only of language. In a play, stage is not the same as scene, and while every play has a script, a play is much more than a script. Where discourse studies would interrogate an organizational script, ethnonarrative seeks to see the play.

A focus on the context of construction gets at both discursive and non-discursive materials in meaning making processes. The meaning of a text is inseparable from the social and historical context of its production and presentation. How texts are created, whom they are created by, and the media through which they are passed are all important aspects of their contexts (Phillips & Brown, 1993). Ethnonarrative takes into account the immediate situation and involves the live, in situ work of construction where implicit assumptions guide both the production and interpretation of action, driving discourse to take particular forms. It is not that we are interviewing managers and using a referential context such as 'a bank merger that took place a year ago' to help us interpret discourse, we are watching them construct in the material context of the merger proposal. Context doesn't just frame discourse, it co-creates with it.

Boje (1991) and Czarniawska (1997) both take what I call an ethnonarrative approach that attends to discourse and context by using ethnographic methods. They capture narratives in natural contexts, looking for not only themes and assumptions underlying the discourse, but cultural and contextual understandings that shape discursive actions. This is in stark contrast to O'Connor's (1995) research and attempts to right the wrong of studying narratives 'wrenched from their natural performance contexts and treated as objectified social facts and mere texts' (Boje 1991: 106).

There are a few narrative studies that do attend to a constructionist context. O'Leary (2003) collected stories at a newspaper organization. While the stories were understood hermeneutically in terms of their links to other stories, the work context also infused meaning into the narratives. Organizational context and history were used not only to help interpret those stories, but helped constitute the narratives that were constructed within the context. Orr (1996) provides another example of an ethnonarrative approach. His study of copy machine technicians explored talk within the social context where it occurred. While narrative was a primary element of the technicians' practice, social context was central in their narrative construction work. Similar to the study I present shortly, Smith and Keyton (2001) reveal deeper meanings of a text by relying on insights from the context of the text's production.

I will now lay out the three concepts that make ethnonarrative a distinct approach within organizational studies. While some are evident in the studies cited above, I will present them more formally here, so that researchers might use them more deliberately and explicitly in conducting ethnonarrative research. In general, the need to analyze the organizational texts and the organizational context in which the talk was generated calls for an ethnonarrative approach that moves beyond spoken discourse and textual analysis and gets at highly contextualized discourse 'in the making.'

Context of construction

The prefix *ethno-* highlights ethnonarrative's inclusion of the local non-discursive elements active in constructing narratives. This calls for observation into a particular context, the immediate context of construction that is constitutive of reality and acts to confine and shape texts in addition to aiding interpretation. This context supports text, changes it, and allows a place for text to be put into play. While separating text/context may be problematic in the more general sense (granted that every text is also a context), a specific text is never its own context of construction.

A focus on the context of construction calls for engaging in participant observation in the situations that narratives are 'naturally' enacted and observation of the construction processes themselves. Both textual and contextual materials are manifested during narrative construction, and it is more clearly evident how both contribute to meaning making. Text/context form an inseparable dialectic in the construction of narratives that are interpreted through reflexive-hermeneutic analysis that shifts between and within the texts and their contexts of construction. If you are blind to the context of construction, you are blind to the in situ sensemaking that is enacted in constructing organizational reality. Flyvbjerg (2001) warns that a lack of criticality and reflection has led entire scholarly disciplines to become blind to context.

A focus on the context of construction directs our attention to discourse-in-use, and we no longer have to infer the marginalized by what is ominous by its exclusion from 'a text' (McPhee, 2004). There is empirical evidence of the silenced in narrative if you can point to competing voices that were present in the context of construction. Let me be clear, we still need texts, but traditional textual analysis may not capture the discursive battles that take place during the construction a text, and a focus on the narrative text that survives the battle only gives us insight into the victor's story. We must attend to the context of construction to reveal those struggles that are not empirically evident in the text. One could even argue that 'the margin'

is a metaphor that blinds us to context. While marginalization does encourage us to look beyond the text, we still never get off the page. But there is nothing that has been pushed into the margins that cannot be found in the context of construction.

Endosymbiotic relationship between text and context

I have discussed engaging in critical or reflexive hermeneutics that shifts between texts within contexts in making interpretations. The hermeneutics of ethnonarrative conceptualizes text/context as having an *endosymbiotic* relationship. An endosymbiont is an organism that lives inside another organism, to the *benefit* of both. If texts are endosymbionts, then we must describe the place, the context, in which they live and breathe in order to understand them. Texts are separate from, but always connected to a context. Texts *live* inside contexts. Outside of contexts such as storytelling performances, texts remain 'out there' on the shelf. So texts are only 'alive' when enacted in a context that constitutes much of their meaning. The concept of endosymbiosis helps clarify how multiple sources of meaning making material relate to one another while attending to them separately. As construction material, they are separate; but in the 'lived experience' (James, 1907/1975), they are inseparable. Ethnonarrative focuses on live texts as they emerge in context.

Given this relationship, ethnonarrative analysis calls for interpretations across, between, and within texts/contexts arising from a hermeneutic concern to search for emergent patterns through continual movement between the two. The endosymbiotic relationship explores not only the parts-to-whole intertextual thinking of hermeneutic approaches, but also whole-within-whole thinking that explores reflections between narrative texts and their contexts of construction. Ethnonarrative requires critical and reflexive hermeneutic shifts between ethnographic/contextual data and narrative/textual data, allowing holistic data-within-data interpretations.

The social act as level of analysis

By now it should be evident that traditional levels of analysis do not fit narrative phenomena. Narrative construction occurs at all levels and contextual bounds shift constantly. Ethnonarrative uses 'the social act' as a unit of analysis. 'In order to analyze social action, one has to observe the process by which it is constructed' (Blumer, 1969: 56). Many researchers use a similar unit of analysis. Ford (1987) calls them 'behavioral episodes' that might be thought of as 'slices of life.' Czarniawska (1997) uses the term 'action nets'

to deny the conventional hierarchy of levels of analysis: society, organization, group, and individual. Dramaturgists such as Goffman (1959, 1974) and Turner (1986) use social performances. The social act as the level of analysis helps to stress the in situ analysis of narrative construction.

An ethnonarrative example

I will provide a short example from ethnonarrative research I conducted at Improvisational Theatre Company (ITC). ITC is a wholly-owned subsidiary of a famous improvisation and sketch comedy theatre revered for its satirical social commentary and for launching countless entertainment careers. Organizations hire ITC to write and perform custom shows just like the ones that made the parent company world famous. ITC works closely with their clients to co-author scripts that include content the client wants to communicate to its audience, usually internal organizational members' as part of a corporate meeting/function/event. ITC actors perform the sketch comedy scripts in roughly five-minute scenes very similar to TV's *Saturday Night Live* – a live televised sketch comedy show in the US. For example, ZT&T Broadband hired ITC to perform at a corporate meeting following a series of acquisitions and consolidations between their telecommunications, internet, and cable divisions. ITC performed at the conclusion of a day-long meeting which took place in a large hotel ballroom with an audience of about a thousand employees. The performance was a high-quality theatrical production, complete with a large stage, lighting effects, and music. One of the skits showed members from the previously separate divisions stranded adrift in a life raft. Humorous caricatures illuminated and exaggerated the differences between the characters with satire (representing the cultural differences in each division), and their chaotic struggling and splashing was outdone only by their bickering. In the end, the characters decided to overcome their own interests and work together in harmony. This of course resulted in their triumph and survival, and mirrored management's contention and proposal that the company's survival depended on these divisions ability to work together following the restructuring.

     I followed the construction of scripts such as this one from the initial inquiry (usually a phone call from clients) to the final script to be performed in a show. I conducted a full-scale ethnography at ITC and was on site every day of the working week for eight months out of a year-long engagement. I attended numerous shows, but my main focus was on the construction of narratives, following them through various production stages. As in a traditional ethnography, I conducted long-term participant observation and

in-depth interviews to get at ITC members cultural knowledge and the shared meanings that underlie their practices. I took field notes and collected various texts, which I coded, analyzed, and deconstructed. I generated a map of the ITC cultural assumptions and various charts and diagrams that outlined ITC processes, which I had member checked (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

A complete ethnographic write up is not necessary here to offer a short demonstration of how I relied on both contextual and textual data to make ethnonarrative interpretations. To do so, I will only need to explain a few of the ITC cultural assumptions I observed in work contexts that relate to the example presented here. For contextual data, I relied on the cultural knowledge I gained through long-term participant observation and the assumptions which I identified and represented in an ethnographic write up. For textual data, I drew from physical scripts (narratives) at various stages of construction and reconstruction, interviews, and tape recorded meetings and conference calls, and the everyday talk I captured while on site. The short script presented here was one of over a hundred that I saw produced over a year's time.

What I got from texts

From listening to several conference calls, transcribing tape recordings, and going through emails, text revealed the following. LarSub Hospital (a large suburban hospital near Chicago) hired ITC to produce a show as part of a community health fair they were putting on that focused on women's health. LarSub did several events like this every year, and this one took place at a rented conference venue. There were free health screenings, healthy cooking demonstrations, and product/information displays related to women's health. The featured entertainment was the ITC performance in a professional theatre at the same venue. ITC began the process several months earlier by writing several 'treatments' (brief scene ideas) based on conversations with LarSub about their event and the themes they wanted to highlight. Of the treatments, the client selects a few to go to full script (the ones they think convey their messages, are funny, etc.). The following script's theme relates to mothers who ironically insist on good family health while ignoring their own (i.e. a smoking mother telling kids not to smoke). The first few lines of the script:

> 'LITTLE' TIMMY ENTERS, BOUNCING A BALL. HE IS PLAYED BY A FULL-GROWN ACTOR.
>
> TIMMY (deep voice): Hi, Mom.
> DORIS: Hello, Little Timmy.

BETTY (neighbor): My, Timmy, you've grown.
TIMMY: Say, Mom, could you fix me a martini before school?
DORIS: Not now, Dear. Mother's too busy grinding her teeth.

(The scene continues, but I'll stop it here for our demonstration purposes.)

Svetlana, the community health coordinator for LarSub Hospital, shared her teams review process via email:

Each of us read copies separately and then compared notes, and we were all in agreement over areas we liked or disliked. We had several issues with the drafts. We had liked the treatment, but the full draft seemed to veer from intended message . . . also DID NOT like the 'causal' way they handled the heart attack symptoms . . . and finally Sue really disliked: speed pills, martini, randy husband.

They were open to our comments and wanted our ideas on how to re-direct message. Ex: instead of speed, go with 'safer' drug reference . . . Doris chains smokes, drinks non-stop espresso and diet cokes, complains she can't sleep, so she self medicates with Tylenol PM . . . this is will be more relevant to type of audience we attract.

Here is the newly rewritten scene:

DORIS: Hello, Little Timmy.
BETTY: My, Timmy, you've grown.
DORIS: Here's a nutritious lunch, Timmy, and here's an apple for your teacher.
TIMMY: Gee whiz, Mom, I'm sure Mr Brown will like the apple. Bye.

(Scene continues . . .)

Here is Svetlana's interpretation of the new script. She had asked what I thought, but I begged off, saying what she thought was more important.

Hans, they spit on my script. Remember my equating that voicing our dislike with the draft was like sending a meal back . . . for fear that the chef will spit on your food . . . well, ITC spit on my script. Didn't like the martini, so I get a f—— apple. I think that was a well-chosen slam at those conservative types at LarSub Hospital. I guess you get what you ask for.

'Getting what you ask for' is a reference to some other material available in text. ITC is known as 'The Temple of Satire' and prides itself on being irreverent and revolutionary in tearing at the dominant social fabric. Svetlana's interpretation that these notions explain changes in the script is plausible and I would say 'correct,' but let us turn to context to demonstrate how it aids interpretation.

What I got from contexts

While some of the cultural and contextual themes I was able to identify did coincide and triangulate what was written in texts, such ITC's satirical and irreverent nature in social critique, the way these assumptions manifested themselves in practice was only evident in context. There were also sub-themes that I identified but were not expressed in any texts. I will try to convey just some of the contextual meaning making material that relates to this example. One is that 'clients are dumb,' an assumption made up of the belief that ITC are professionals who have almost exclusive authority in determining what's funny, and sub-themes of irreverence that take a distinctive anti-corporate flavor. A related assumption was expressed in efforts by ITC members to resist being defined as 'sell outs,' who make their living from corporate clients even though their history of satire is based largely (especially in recent history) on the social critique of modern organizations. While actors and writers everywhere might resist notions of being 'sell outs' (i.e. serious authors reduced to writing greeting cards or Shakespearian trained actors having to appear in TV commercials), at ITC this involved active resistance within the very context of working for corporate clients. There were feelings of superiority to the clients (who often acted as editor/censor) and defensiveness about writers' freedom. Finally, the office was playful and the writers loved challenges that involved word play and humor. It was the jazz equivalent of 'showing your chops' to prove your talents. Metaphors and sarcasm were everywhere, and one had to become adept at reading or working with contextual cues to spot or produce irony. Indeed a prerequisite for irony is an incongruent context that makes the meaning of discourse 'opposite' from its literal (text) meaning. Irony, therefore, requires both text and context to make its meaning. Taken together, these contextual assumptions resulted in one particular practice which sought to inject undetected meanings (that supported ITC's identities and cultural assumptions) into texts. You had to be adept at using both text and context to produce these shared meanings, and had to have insight into the context of construction to arrive at interpretations the writers intended. Geertz (1973) ponders how we are able to distinguish a wink from a blink, and a wink from a burlesque

wink, or even someone making fun of someone attempting to burlesque a wink? You need context. So how do you maintain your subversion of your paying corporate client without letting on? It has to be clandestine, a wink to the other revolutionaries demonstrating that you are not 'selling out.' In the scene above, that wink is 'Mr Brown.'

Ethnonarrative interpretation: Texts within contexts of construction

'Mr Brown' is a piece of text that seems meaningless (at least arbitrary) without insights into the context of construction. To share the meaning of 'Mr Brown' with you, I have to present not only the text or context, but this text within the context of construction, along with some other texts (verbal) that were produced in the context of constructing this text under scrutiny. 'Mr Brown' is a code word for the metaphor 'asshole,' used colloquially at ITC as 'You're being a complete Mr Brown.'

I was only able to interpret the meaning through the ethnonarrative approach that sees the endosymbiotic relation of texts living within contexts. Every week at ITC, there were various running jokes. Some would last more than a week, but jokes, jargon, quips, etc. get old soon and talented improvisers like to use fresh material. To operate successfully in this context, you might pick up on the joke, use it a few times yourself (usually in more interesting or challenging ways than the previous reference – similar to 'riffing' in jazz improvisation), and then move on the next joke, saying, or topic that emerges. The week this script was being written, the running joke was 'Mr Brown.' It was shared by all and common enough that week that an ITC member might discover their lunch order was wrong and declare, 'What a bunch of Mr Browns,' of the delivery people.

While this is a discursive example, and Mr Brown-as-asshole was indeed a discursive construction, it was not only discursive. The non-discursive, contextual material that was never in text was the cultural assumption that implanting 'Mr Brown' into a script was something that would be done at ITC. This move is based on cultural and tacit knowledge ITC members shared about how to 'play' and how to demonstrate their skill and allegiance to the ITC norms of irreverence. The writer knew insider knowledge of the context of construction would cue the correct interpretation for other insiders. It is the non-discursive that makes the discursive comment meaningful (the deeper meaning beyond calling someone an asshole behind their back but to their face).

Comparing the approaches (Figure 1), we see that working with this text alone would not have revealed all the meaning surrounding 'Mr Brown.'

Svetlana's interpretation resembles the 'situated discourse' approach and works with multiple texts and the simple broader context of what ITC is known for. She was partially correct, but her 'situated discourse' interpretation involves only the apple. She senses she is being attacked for removing the risqué martini, and we can say she is able to accurately describe 'the situation' but not the meaning. My ethnonarrative interpretation came from revealing the alternate textual meanings through hermeneutic shifts between various texts within the context of construction. I am confident the meaning of the line 'I'm sure Mr Brown will like the apple' is 'I'm sure the asshole corporate clients will like the safe, unfunny, boring apple,' but is also an expression of ITC's unspoken, tacit cultural values.

Using the ethnonarrative approach offers a more plausible and credible interpretation. Even when working predominantly with texts, the specific context of construction aids in interpretation beyond 'situating' discourse or using broader context as a 'code breaker.' Another advantage is in capturing voices or events that are influential in context but not evident in text. While narrative analysis is already sensitive to voices that have been marginalized (Boje, 1995, 2001), we can move beyond sensitivity and empirically demonstrate what has been marginalized or silenced. Finally, we can gain an appreciation of how context is used as material that goes into meaning making, but also show empirically how texts get their various meanings from the contexts in which they operate.

Conclusion

So how might researchers proceed with the ethnonarrative approach? While it brings richer understanding to organizational life, I am afraid some of the same old caveats in traditional ethnography remain (time consuming, tenure unfriendly, etc.). Nevertheless, there is evidence suggesting movement towards an ethnonarrative approach and examples that show narrative research can be improved through ethnographic inquiry into the contexts where texts are produced. Samra-Fredericks (2003, 2004) analyzes talk in 'naturally occurring interactions' and relies on ethnography of the research context as opposed to relying on analysis of text to 'point to' a context in which the text occurs, an important distinction in the ethnonarrative approach. Barry et al. (2006) experiment with comparing text-only versus contextually-informed research interpretations and provide some advice for conducting team-based research. However, just as with any interpretive research, researchers generated different interpretations and resolving the differences ended up requiring various forms of merging text and context.

I would suggest using a combination of all three approaches outlined above in generating interpretations by making reflexive-hermeneutic shifts between texts, between texts and contexts, and texts within contexts in an endosymbiotic relationship. When a researcher identifies their approach as ethnonarrative, this will imply the assumptions of a context of construction that constitutes meaning along with text, an endosymbiotic relationship between text/context, and the social act as the level of analysis. In addition to providing some concepts and methods that distinguish the ethnonarrative approach, one hope is to correct what seems to be a growing imbalance of research that focuses on texts as the sole construction material. Context is material too, and the non-discursive makes meaning. Words are only half the story.

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