

The Use of Narratives to Reveal the Secret Data of Organisational Life

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Abstract: This paper considers the use of narrative exchanges in the form of letters and conversations as a legitimate research method when collecting “secret data” within organisational settings. It refers to narrative exchanges the authors’ undertook over a three-month period, regarding their different perspectives on their University Staff Appraisal System. It explores personal tensions and anxieties that reside within the “secret data” of organisational life. It also reveals a concern regarding “professional commitments” with colleagues and the “managerial” edicts that dominate their work environment. From a “critical management” perspective, the paper initially provides an overview of the postmodern position and its impact upon organisational power relationships and knowledge, as individuals strive to attain and gain their authentic, personal voice within the domination of modernistic organisations. It then explains the methodological approach used for the narrative exchanges and describes the context and relationship of the two colleagues. Commencing from a discussion of organisational policy and postmodernist critiques the conversations increasingly developed into a dialogical meditation on the relationship between “self” and “other”. These narratives revealed, through their autographical, autobiographical and at times surreal discourses, messages that are often absent from conventional research data. The paper concludes with a perspective regarding critical management in which individual values, dignity, honesty and respect are upheld. Thus, narrative exchanges of this kind allow dialogical conversations in which statements are agreed, accepted, challenged or sometimes synthesised to be used as a means to explore and collect legitimate “secret data” of organisational life within an environment that respects the ethical and value systems of the participants engaged in narrative exchanges.

Keywords: postmodern, surrealism, autography, autobiography, aesthetic, individual voice, “critical turn”

1. Introduction

Management literature in the last two decades is beginning to witness a growing interest in Critical Management perspectives (see for example Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a; 1992b; 1996; Elliot and Turnbull 2005; Grey and Willmott, 2005). These have identified tensions on the one hand between dominant, modernist and conventional orthodox ideological practices that focus on performance driven “measurable management outputs” and on the other those that are now espousing perspectives that embrace humanistic, ethical, empowering emancipatory perspectives and practices. Thus, the dilemma facing individuals in contemporary organisations and their management is one of competing values where they are torn between the domination of managerial controls that monitors them by performance measures and professional structures and career aspirations that demands they adopt an autonomous and ethical attitude towards their work. At the root of these tensions is the domination of the modernist organisation that is underpinned by power and authority structures as a means to control those who work in these environments and have received much attention historically (see for example Weber, 1947; French and Raven, 1959 Emerson, 1962; Hall, 1972). What follows are accounts of aspects of the organisational life of the authors’ (Andrew and Alan) which reveal, from their personal accounts, reflections, tensions and anxieties between their “professional commitments” with colleagues and the “managerial” edicts that dominate their work environment, as they struggle with the modernist domination of the organisation and the need for personal voice and identity. The paper commences with an overview of the postmodern and the power, knowledge and authentic voice that Andrew and Alan have located. It goes on to describe methodological considerations and the context and relationship of the two colleagues that were the foundations for their narrative exchanges. The paper concludes by offering a defence of the dialogical method of research enquiry and a call for a “critical management” perspective to locate this approach.

2. The postmodern: Power, knowledge, truth and authenticity

Foucault refers to powerful discourse as ‘regimes of truth’ (Couzens and Hoy, 1988:19), and doing so, this enables us to see knowledge as ‘tied to politics, that is to power’. This challenges the argument that the concept of truth implies knowledge that is beyond all possible doubt. As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) note, Foucault (1981) did not accept the usual sociological categories, both in the questions he posed and the concepts he introduced, his desire was to understand the power relations and the

mechanisms of power that effect everyday lives. As Foucault (1981:94) states 'Power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something one holds on to or allows to slip away. Thus, power is relational; it becomes apparent when it becomes exercised'. As such, power is associated with practices, techniques and procedures. Further, Townley (1993:523) notes 'Power is employed at all levels and through many dimensions' and 'Thus questions such as "who has power?" or "where or in what, does power reside?" are changed to what Foucault termed the "how" of power: those practices, techniques, and procedures that give it effect'.

Power and knowledge relations are inextricably interwoven (see for example Eribon:1991) and according to Usher and Edwards (1994:85) 'modernity's liberal-humanist paradigm, which is dominant in western industrialised countries and whose influence spreads even wider, accustoms us to seeing knowledge as distinct from, indeed as counterpoised to power'. In this view, they claim that 'knowledge is a (disinterested) search for truth which power gets in the way of and distorts'. Thus, they go on to posit the view that the implication is, therefore, that 'truth' and 'knowledge are only possible under conditions where power is not exercised (Usher and Edwards, 1994:85). However, the acknowledgement that the relationship of knowledge, power and truth does exist provides a postmodernist position that questions this ethical stance (See Usher and Edwards, 1994). Postmodernist epistemology challenges us to question our own thinking and our "personal comfort zones". It openly challenges the modernistic scientific discourse, as Johnson and Duberley (2000:109) note 'which imperialistically expunges plurality and forces epistemic closure'. Therefore, postmodernism gives approval to relativism via a subjective epistemology and ontology, and truth becomes relative to an individuals engagement with the world (Jeffcutt, 1994; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Beliefs, theories, or values are claimed to be relative to the age or society that produced them and not valid outside those circumstances. All knowledge is socially produced and is contingent. Therefore, all knowledge is biased and independent standards of truth do not exist. Postmodernism challenges the notions that truth claims can be objectively arrived at and as Foucault (1988) notes:

'My problem has always been the problem of the relationship between subject and truth. How does the subject enter into a certain game of truth? So it is that I was led to pose the problem power-knowledge, which is not for me the fundamental problem but an instrument allowing the analysis - in a way that seems to me be the most exact - of the problem of the relationships between subject and games of truth.'

From a critical theorists perspective valid knowledge can only emerge from a situation of open, free and uninterrupted dialogue, and takes the form of self-conscious criticism (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1998:260-299). Habermas (1963, and 1970:360-375) being a principal exponent of this genre and an opponent of positivism argues that the idea of a neutral apolitical science, based on a rigid separation of facts and values, is untenable since questions of truth are inextricably bound up with political problems of freedom to communicate and exchange ideas.

As McHale (1992) notes, the essence of the modernistic project is encapsulated by the question 'how can the world be truthfully known?' Therefore, epistemology is value ridden as Usher and Edwards (1994:149) note 'This epistemology is never "innocent" because it always contains within itself a set of values - which means there is always a politics of personal exchanges which implies power relations. Epistemic reflexivity makes us more aware of the necessary place of research communities and the power of the exclusion and closure of such communities'. Within this postmodern context, what follows is the methodology and approach taken in the production of personal narrative exchanges of the two participants that reveals "secret data" potentially open to further analysis and interpretation.

3. Personal exchanges: Methodological approach and setting the scene

Methodology

Postmodern narrative exchanges were used to "unlock" the hidden data of the Staff Appraisal System (see Best and Kelber, 1991; Lyotard, 1984; Jameson, 1991 and 1994; Deluze and Guattari, 1987). Intertextuality was central in the approach we took as it 'posits its alternative network, a dialogical conversation among witters and readers of texts. Intertextuality is all the dialoguing that goes on between and within narratives' (Boje, 2001:13). As Bakhtin (1984) outlined in his concept of polyphonic truth, intertextuality is a number of mutually addressed, albeit contradictory and logically inconsistent, statements. Truth needs a multitude of carrying voices. It cannot be held within a single mind, it also cannot be expressed by "a single mouth". The polyphonic truth requires many

simultaneous voices. This does not imply that that many voices carry partial truths that complement each other, or that a number of different voices make the truth if simply "averaged" or "synthesized". It is the act of mutual voices of engagement and of commitment to the context of a real-life event that distinguishes truth from untruth.

As such, there is a nexus of historicity, productivity and genealogy where these alternatives are part of a system of intertextuality. As Foucault (1972:92) states 'there can be no statement that in one way or another does not reactualize others' and that each alternative is 'plural...[a] weave of signifiers' in an ongoing 'weaving and interweaving fabric of precedent and anticipated texts. As such each storytelling has a genealogy as Foucault has explained' (Boje, 2001:78). Therefore, narratives focus on the ways in which people make and use stories to interpret the world. Moreover, they are not primarily interested in whether stories are 'true' but that they are produced by people in the context of specific social, historical and cultural locations and are interpretive devices through which people represent themselves and their worlds to themselves and to others. As such narrative theory argues that people produce accounts of themselves that are 'storied' i.e. that are in the form of stories/narratives and that the social world is itself 'storied'. For example, 'public' stories circulate in popular culture, providing the means by which people can construct personal identities and personal narratives and therefore link the past to the present. Narrative can be characterised by accounts that contain an element of transformation where action and characters can be brought together in a plot line. As such they have a temporal dimension and use "emplotment" as a process through which they are produced where many disparate elements go together to make up one story. For example, digressions and sub-plots have "a point" which often takes the form of a moral message (see Lawler, 2002). The narratives here were analysed using critical discourse analysis (Myers, 2009) which enabled access to the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind "other worlds" revealing hidden motivations behind the texts and their interpretation. This could be understood as Critical or Discourse Analysis and deconstructive reading and interpretation. Whilst Critical Discourse Analysis does not provide clear answers to issues, it does enable us to understand the conditions behind them and makes us aware of their nature and possible resolution. Thus, Discourse Analysis considers how the texts are constructed and the social contexts in which they are embedded (Myers, 2009). As Myers (2009:173) notes:

'The word discourse refers to communication that goes back and forth, like an argument or debate. All language can be treated as a social interaction (there is always a speaker/writer and listener/reader), but discourse analysis focuses mostly on language in use – the use of naturally occurring language in speech and/or written texts'

Setting the scene

The interlocutors in the exchanges were Alan and Andrew who work in a medium sized UK university and first met when they embarked on their doctoral studies in 1998. They engaged in their personal exchanges after an informal conversation regarding the Staff Appraisal System of the university. Alan, a member of the support staff, had been involved in the development of the system as a union official. Andrew, a member of the academic staff had not. After discussing their personal perspectives and the possibility of a collaborate project, they agreed to exchange their personal perspectives on the system. An initial set of ideas and issues emerged which focused on notions of dominant organisational structures. It was agreed that their exchanges, by electronic communication, would be conducted in an environment of honesty, respect and values that recognised each other's individuality and freedom of thought and speech, thus eliminating, as far as possible, any perceived power relation that might have existed before they agreed to their narrative exchanges. As such, these lines of discourse lead them to explore the relationship between meta-narratives and personal voice. Alan began by suggesting that the appraisal policy represented a meta-narrative sympathetic to personal voice and Andrew replied that this was an illusion and the power relationship between the meta-narrative of the policy and individual voices remained, with the organisation imposing its will on individuals. However, a drama unfolded in which notions of authenticity and an aesthetic dimension emerged in the narrative exchanges. Thus the exchanges were considered "authentic" in the sense that they displayed spontaneity and honesty and "aesthetic" in the sense that a "drama unfolded".

4. Secret data: Reflections of the self and organisation from personal discourse

A stream of "spontaneous" responses allowed the exchanges to follow their own "course of revelation". They revealed personal voice, and a desire for trust, honesty and integrity by the two

participants. The exchanges were conducted within a “safe” environment where mutual respect allowed for, on the one hand, “brutal reposts” and on the other the exploration of esoteric subject matter, as their exchanges became more intense, revealing their organisational life stories. The accounts at times displayed autographical and surreal moments and what might be termed as traditional autobiographical accounts (see Bullough and Pinnear, 2001). As such, the notion of personal voice takes on a “spontaneous turn” according to each individual’s immediate sense of conscious state, preserved as “text in the making”. What follows are examples and reflections of these exchanges.

Personal voice

The notion of personal voice was for both participants an essential element of the exchanges. At the beginning of the first letter, Alan identifies a postmodern discourse regarding voice:

“I’ve been thinking about our conversation regarding postmodernism and meta-narratives and it seems as if postmodernism encourages and promotes the voices and self determination of small groups and individuals”.

He continues by quoting from the organisations appraisal policy in order to support his belief that the policy statements allow personal voices to be heard and supported. Andrew replies in this same conversational style. He disagrees with Alan’s view, feeling that although the organisations representatives sometimes go through the processes of negotiation they retain the power of decision-making. In the opening paragraph of his second letter, he says:

“We are faced with a tension between organisational dictates, and individual voice in a world of multiple voices all of which have their own turn on reality”.

The conversations begin to take a poetic turn as feelings and ideas surface. Andrew says at the end of letter two:

“Surely what the post-modern tells us is that even if our voices cannot be heard it does not stop us whispering, it does not stop us thinking – a silent voice of consciousness that guides our actions”.

In letter three, Alan comments that Andrew’s words and ideas seem reminiscent of Sartre’s notion of existentialism. He enters the ontological world with Andrew and the texts shift accordingly. Alan raises concerns regarding the nature of authenticity in the following lines:

“Also we search our souls for authenticity which is a shape shifter and the more we attempt to embrace it the more it slips through our embrace”

In letter five, Andrew begins by musing upon choice and authenticity:

“We move like shadows in and out of the world – we are drawn to what is ‘for us’, and return to the dark when things ‘are not for us’”

The letters continue to oscillate between poetic language attempting to capture notions of ontology and reflections on the organisations appraisal policy sometimes weaving these styles and ideas together in order to communicate something that seems important. What is clear is that there are moments in which the protagonists enter each other’s styles of thinking and writing suggesting they are listening to and valuing the others concerns and views. This is particularly evident when Alan says in letter seven:

“I find the shift to thinking of postmodernism as identifying/listening to voices/narratives large or small, helpful”.

This is a realisation that echoes Foucault’s view that power is relational rather than being owned by one party or another. Individual voice constantly in tension with organisations is a major theme of the exchanges.

The revelation of self: Autography and Autobiography

The exchanges were personal and informal. The texts were conversational and had the characteristics of the authors explicitly imprinted on them and thus embraced autographic tendencies in their production. Autobiographical elements were also prominent in the narrative exchanges. Alan’s experience as a union representative and Andrews’s experiences as an academic subject to the dictates of the organisation were significant. In addition they were both researchers also involved in

teaching, Alan in education and art and Andrew in business studies. Their particular professional experiences naturally influenced the exchanges. Whilst the notion of personal voice was foremost, it was acknowledged by both that this could only be effective if they aimed for authenticity in their exchanges. The desire to produce texts that reveal hidden truths that are allowed to surface from the less conscious to the more conscious mind, could be understood as a desire to be authentic. Sartre (1948:48) suggests that 'bad faith' in terms of lying to oneself is a denial of what it means to be human.

Both Andrew and Alan agreed that they would try not to stifle their inner consciousness and explore its "depths" using the meditative approaches akin to Husserl (1950). At several moments in these exchanges, Andrew felt a certain satisfaction through the freedom to express subconscious ideas and feelings that he wanted challenged, but simultaneously he wanted "brutally" to challenge Alan's thoughts and ideas. Authentic dialogue between Andrew and Alan that at times verged on the aesthetic, revealed hidden truths regarding their individual concerns and methods of "self" revelation regarding personal identification and role in the organisation. The word 'aesthetic' is understood here as a kind of beauty manifest in the style and content of these texts or the interrelationship between them. Sometimes the texts began to read like poetry or prose with a vocabulary, which reflects these categories and the authors enjoyed the process of allowing the texts to flow as it gave them a sense of freedom of thought in their writing. A certain excitement and pleasure is conveyed as the texts twist and turn and the plot thickens. The sense of freedom felt by the authors seemed to be a significant aspect of both the aesthetic of the letters and creative openness in which new understanding might emerge. The aesthetic turn experienced by Andrew and Alan bordered at times on the surreal, whereby a state of unconscious connection was formed in the written textual exchanges. At times, both participants found that they did not "have to think" about what they should write in response to each other, their exchanges became a "stream of consciousness". In the first surrealist manifesto, surrealism is defined as:

'Pure psychic automatism through which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true functioning of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason and outside any aesthetic or moral pre-occupation' (Stangos, 1994:124)

These letters proved liberating in two ways. First, they allowed free expression and second they allowed the exchanges to transcend the "normal boundaries" of research discourse. When traditional qualitative approaches such as semi-structured and unstructured interviews or focus groups are adopted, the notion of researcher reflexivity is an ever-present spectre. This naturally opens such approaches to researcher pre-suppositions and respondent bias that leans towards "what the researcher wants to hear" or may deflect certain issues if they are too painful for the respondent to relay to the researcher. These personal narratives escape these objections because they were exchanges between individuals who had a relationship of trust and understanding and whilst the accounts might be construed as challenging to those involved in the exchanges they aimed to be conducted with transparency and honesty. It is in this way these encounters are considered authentic. Naturally, the analysis of such personal and sensitive data will be of concern to some. Two central questions arise. The first is who is responsible for analysing the data? The second is should the data be analysed at all?

In response to the first question, because of the dialogical approach and an understanding of power as relational, the answer must be the two participants. How any of the data is used should involve dialogue, debate and negotiation in a climate of trust between them. However, it is only if each individual is accountable and has freedom to analyse and interpret their own discourse that power structures can be broken down (see for example Freire, 1970)).

In response to the second question, for those who reside within traditional research approaches, not to analyse interpret the data is an untenable position as convention research methodologies demand that the analysis and interpretation of data is the obligation of the researcher. This is problematic if we are to avoid "doing violence" to the data generated from the free flowing dialogue and freedom of expression and can be a difficult issue to resolve. Tensions can arise within the postmodern research perspective, where data is presented "just as it is" for the reader to analyse and interpret from a personal perspective. However, this becomes a "double imperative" when confronted with narrative exchanges between two participants. The counter argument is not to analyse and interpret personal accounts. In other words, they should be "left just as they are" and interpreted by those who read

them on their own terms as they encounter and immerse themselves in the narratives. This approach has an ethical dimension whereby those engaged in narrative exchanges and those who read them have the right to their personal voice whether participants or receivers of such accounts. Rand (1957 and 1964) argues the ethical should embrace the right of *rational* individuals to pursue their own lives to their full potential and fulfilment. Values are immutable which an individual holds at the core of their being. These are an individual's right of independent and intellectual freedom; the upholding of an individual's contribution to society and organisational decision-making; and self worth. These values should not be open to compromise, to do so would be to "sell out" and leave an individual open to corruption.

When ethical and value lead approaches are introduced we are awoken to the understanding that recognises the domination of organisations that reside within a modernistic value system that diminishes individual worth. Decision must ultimately be those of the participants involved in the exchanges and a common understanding has to be reached if they wish to project their concerns and issues onto their organisational world (see Habermas, 1984). Here a philosophical turn ensues if we are to establish the essence of what confronts us, if it is to embrace action rather than rhetoric and verbal posturing. Indeed one could say a "critical turn" has been arrived at that might offer a more promising road for us to travel, through an ethical and value lead management research approach. Couched within the ethical and value lead approaches to management research the word "critical" takes on an existence that transcends our everyday awareness of what it normally means in our taken for granted parlance. Its meaning takes on a dimension that goes beyond the negative connotations of passing judgements and criticism, however well meaning these may be. It challenges us to confront the tensions of contemporary organisational and business practices differently by introducing an ethical and value driven dimension that goes beyond legalism. It challenges us to question how social justice is administered within the workplace and the way individuals can reach their full potential as human beings. It is a position that espouses that every person should have freedom of thought to judge independently. It is a position whereby values are those placed in the free intellectual domain of an individual and one that Rand (1954) extols within her objectivist philosophy whereby an individual's life is the ultimate standard of value.

5. Conclusions

Whilst personal narrative and discourse analysis always remains a matter of interpretation because of the lack of "hard data" provided, it has to be recognised that the reliability and the validity of such encounters depends on the force of the arguments provided as they are all subject to their own deconstructive reading and counter-interpretations. As such, the validity of critical analysis of such encounters is dependent on the quality of the rhetoric. This appeal to idealism can possibly only be achieved if rational minds meet, that recognise individual freedoms that must be respected. Nor should they be curtailed to the banal customs and practices that are expected in the cultural setting that they were created (see Rand, 1957 and 1964). However, idealistic notions of individuality often have to give way to traditional research practices that require an interpretative framework to make sense of the data. Thus, those who engage in personal narrative exchanges (as presented in this paper) will be challenged with a tension between the freedom to express their personal stories and that of modifying their position in order to address the irrationalities of the world they confront.

However, notwithstanding this, the use of personal exchanges has unveiled an approach that proved to be liberating and revealing to the participants involved in ways not normally transmitted or communicated when using traditional qualitative data collection methods such as semi and unstructured interviews or focus groups. These exchanges allowed "free expression", explored the aesthetics of contemporary organisational life and at times verged on the surreal, thus offering insights that are not normally open to conventional data collection methods. The narratives, whilst commencing with the "concrete" reality of the Staff Appraisal System, "abstracted" to more fundamental issues of organisational power, politics and the need for individual freedom and the authentic voice of individuals working within contemporary organisations. These narratives therefore revealed through their autographical and autobiographical styles and at times surrealist discourses hidden messages that candidly call for individual values and an ethical perspective that is not part of "common" discourse. The relational nature and trust engendered when undertaking such exchanges in which keeping an open mind is a prerequisite is a position that both correspondents advocate to attain a more authentic account of organisational life. In a complex world of diverse narratives and vested interests, this process offers a chance of actions being taken that are guided by consideration and compassion regarding the personal needs and desires of others as well as one's self.

Thus, we radically need to define the territory of the “critical turn” if we are to “unfreeze” individual concerns within the research act. Therefore, we believe that the “critical turn” is the recognition of the individual voice in organisational research settings, the rejection of the meta-narrative and the acceptance of the personal experiences individuals want to share with the world. We therefore offer the following to stimulate comment and debate in the furthering of individual freedom:

Critical Management are practices that uphold ethical and moral values in the pursuit of individual liberty and freedom. It supports and creates working environments where individuals can critically judge business and management practices without fear of retribution. It upholds and respects the dignity of an individual by giving them a voice and meaning to their social and work environments in their pursuit of intellectual freedom, fulfilment and expression of thought. (Armitage, 2008)

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