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Narrative, Power and Employee Voice

1. Introduction

Professor Werner Nienhüser has had a distinguished career as a scholar in the fields of employment relations (ER) and human resource management (HRM). He has successfully worked across disciplinary boundaries and has integrated both ER and HRM perspectives into his teaching and research. A strength of his work is that he brings from his interest in industrial relations a critical perspective to his analysis of human resource management.

Werner Nienhüser has forged strong connections with international colleagues, and we were delighted to be asked to contribute to this volume. We have both had the privilege of being visiting Professors at the University of Duisburg-Essen, and we have both had the honour of hosting Werner Nienhüser at our respective universities (Griffith University and Bond University). Werner Nienhüser has visited Australia on a number of occasions over the last decade, and on each visit he has given illuminating seminars to staff and students on German employment relations and human resource management practices, and on some of his specific research projects.

Long conversations and mutual interests have also generated collegial research opportunities. Michael Barry and Werner Nienhüser conducted research together on the German aviation industry which appeared in a special edition of the International Journal of HRM (Barry & Nienhüser 2010). This article examined how Germany’s traditional flag carrier, Lufthansa, responded to the growth of low-cost competition by engaging in this market through its own low cost subsidiary, and the implications this had for employment relations.

Werner Nienhüser also gave Ken Parry the opportunity to draft an article for Management Revue (Parry 2008). The article was about the power of narrative. It linked narrative theory with autoethnography and critical theory. This work was a case in point about the power of discourse and narrative in organisations. In this chapter we attempt to bring together this work on power and narrative and link this to the research of Ken Parry in leadership, the research of Michael Barry on employment relations and employee voice, and Werner Nienhüser’s own work in employment relations and human resource management.

Narrative

The subject of Ken Parry’s Management Revue (2008) investigation is a reflection upon the generation of the theoretical argument put forward by Parry and Hansen (2007), which was based upon the notion of the organisational story as leadership. The essence of the argument is that people follow organisational stories as much as they follow people, so organisational stories can be considered as leadership. The organisational story creates a narrative. The narrative generates

We thank Steve Kempster for his insights and commentary, all of which helped to create this argument.

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an outcome that people can work toward. People join with the narrative, rather than follow the leader. Therefore, the story is hugely powerful. The identity being followed need not be a person.

Norman Fairclough (1995), the doyen of critical discourse analysis, argued about the power of discourse; and the intentional and unintentional asymmetries of power that evolve as a result of the language that people use. As examples, the language that often emerges in employment negotiations about "freedom of association" and "occupational health and safety", or about "legal requirements" or "equity issues" are invariably used as \textit{fait accomplis} in order to privilege one power position over another such that negotiating positions are consolidated. Yes, much of the discourse and narrative about leadership is about power and domination.

Ken Parry’s work also was autoethnographic. Boyle and Parry (2007) contend that the prime focus of an organisational autoethnographic study is to illuminate the relationship between the individual and the employing organisation. In particular, the intensely reflexive nature of autoethnography as an autobiographical form of research, allows the researcher to intimately connect the person with the organisation through a peeling back of multiple layers of consciousness, thoughts, feelings and beliefs. Within autoethnography, the individual and their social structure are connected intimately. It can be an intensely powerful way to research employment relations. Sometimes it is not enough to be objective in the assessment of how employment relations are enacted and negotiated. The intensely reflexive nature of autoethnography gives an insight into the intensely personal nature of events.

2. The Power of Metaphor

For many years now metaphors have been the subject of research and research data. They also now appear as the methodology for research, as suggested by Conger and Toegal (2002) and in Parry and Kempster’s (2013) empirical work on the narrative of charismatic leadership as reflected in metaphors and movie genres. They also emerge as the outcomes of research. An example of the latter is the work of Kempster (2006), who found leadership development to be akin to an apprenticeship.

We have already mentioned that the notion of "story as leadership" is a metaphor. Part of what Hans Hansen and Ken Parry proposed is that the story is a metaphor for leadership. An objective reality is highly problematic (Dachler & Hosking 1995); arguably there is only the reality to each individual. Hence, the metaphor becomes that person’s reality. A metaphor is intensely personal, just like that person’s own self-reflexive story, their autoethnography.

So, in constructing stories to make sense of something, we help to make the thing itself, which is both created and represented by the story. When we tell stories about ourselves to others, they know us not only by those stories, but "as" those stories. Hence, the nature and impact of stories can be powerful. Stories about Werner Nienhüser will help to promulgate the legend about the gentleman and scholar that he is. His identity as such can be consolidated by the presence of those stories and by the dissemination of those stories.
Fables and Parables as Leadership

The ultimate exemplars of organizational stories might be sayings, parables and fables. People learn through following the morals inherent within the parable of the boy who cried “wolf” or the fable about the goose that laid the golden egg. We propose that these messages are metaphors for behaviour in organisations. After all, we all know of someone who metaphorically cried “wolf” and we all know of examples of how an organisation has killed the goose that laid the metaphorical golden egg. This does not happen occasionally. Some organisations are full of metaphorical dead geese, and people wantonly crying “wolf”.

With each unique telling of a story, people build a role for themselves within the macro story that is unfolding around them. They keep unfolding the story until it provides an inevitably better existence for them as individuals. The person who is the wolf must be storied as doing organisational society a service by weeding out the weaker members and the non-performers and making the organisation strong by doing what it does well. The person who is the shepherd is attempting to bring to the attention of others the dangers that lurk all around them, and to keep others in a state of vigilance. The person who is the sheep is the innocent victim who is removed from the hell that was their organisational existence, and can now pursue a better existence with another organisation, and in so doing, realize their inevitable better existence.

There is an implicit moral rectitude in all these stories. They are all micro-stories within the macro-story of the metaphorical organisational boy who cried “wolf”. The same process unfolds for all the micro- and macro-stories that we hear narrated around us every day.

3. Leadership and Stories as a Source of Power

The final area of overlap that Hansen and Parry found between the literatures on leadership and organisational stories is more specifically about the role of power. David Boje (1995; 2001) contends that some competing narratives are more hegemonic than others and thus marginalise other narratives and silence some constructive voices. Ray Gordon (2002) found that stories are one of the deep power structures through which leadership is dispersed, often problematically, in organisations. Hansen and Parry warned that we should be conscious of the power relations we construct with stories. Examples are the behaviours that are encouraged or discouraged in our organisational stories. For instance, we could ask whether risk taking and creativity are rewarded or punished. We could ask who is benefiting from the enactment of various stories, and who authored the stories and for what purposes. Similarly, we could ask what underlying assumptions are seen in our stories. For example, are leaders in our corporate stories all white men who value work over family? Are they therefore the people who control power and wealth?

Part of the power of a story lies in the magnitude of the audience for the narration of that story. The chief executive can access a large audience by narrating again and again at meetings, in emails, in documents, in twitter, in facebook, in press releases and in annual reports. Such a large audience gives this story great power. By contrast, the disempowered clerical worker will access only a few colleagues at the lunch table. Such a small audience gives this story comparatively less power. More importantly, the chief executive’s story must give the clerical workers a powerful role to play within that power-laden story. To not give them such a role will be to put their following at risk.
Stories can be instruments of oppression and mystification as well as instruments of contestation and rebellion. Sims (2003) provides examples of how middle managers "story" or narrate their lives in an environment where those stories are contested and resisted. We posit that if you are not allowed to narrate yourself in some way, it is the same as not being allowed to live that way. For example, if women cannot be storied as leaders, they cannot be leaders. Similarly, if the "workers" are storied as whingers and lazy employees with a bad attitude, or as "costs" that must be reduced through "productivity enhancement", they will forever be outcasts and pariahs in the organisational narrative, unable to be productive members of the organisational community.

Whereas Sims is discussing story-telling as much as the nature of the story, the point is well made that a story can be contested by another story, just as one leader can be over-ruled by a more powerful or persuasive leader. Power and influence are central in leadership. Dahl (1957) said power was getting someone to do something they otherwise would not have done, and Yukl (2002) has concluded the obvious point that the utilisation of power is axiomatic of leadership.

An Organisational Example

The similarities between the literatures on leadership and organisational stories provide an important background. However, to add some utility to this argument, it is probably necessary to apply a practical focus. A contemporary UK example of organisational story as leadership, comes from Rippin (2005). Rippin examined the narrative of organisational change within Marks and Spencer. What emerged from the analysis of the organisational story was that it was based on the metaphor of the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty. The metaphor of the legend enabled greater sense to be made of the impact of this narrative on the actions and motivations of followers. Of course, people did not follow Sleeping Beauty, with its inherently gendered characteristics of male domination and misogyny. Rather, they followed the Marks and Spencer story; Rippin proposes that this story reinforced perceptions of misogyny, aggression and patriarchy within the change process. As Rippin (2005: 591) said, "Marks and Spencer's employees and other stakeholders have colluded with a culture of symbolic violence in their toleration of bullying and their impatience with and expulsion of less aggressive leaders". In effect, Rippin contends that this was the organisational change leadership that this organisational story displayed.

The dominant paradigm story was about organisational change and dominance and success. There was no mention in the dominant story of bullying or of wanton misuse of power. However, some people were marginalised from the story. They had no role or they had a powerless role, and the story gave them little chance of a happy ending. Important characteristics of a leadership story were missing from the Marks and Spencer story. In particular, people had no empowered part in the story and there was no apparent happy ending for them. Leadership was not reflected. The people did not follow that story.

4. An ER Perspective: Employee Voice as a Form of Narrative

We have highlighted above that organisations are a collection of the narratives of those who participate within them, that metaphor plays an important role in organisational life, and that power is core to understanding how in organisations some stories are created, reproduced and come to dominate other stories. These insights from the leadership field also resonate strongly in em-
Employment relations and human resource management with power and voice emerging as important concepts.

Werner Nienhüser has made an important contribution to understanding the role that power plays in the dynamic employment relationship from both a management and employee perspective. He has sought to explain the interplay of power relations between capital and labour and the development of different human resource management strategies (Nienhüser 2004). He has addressed why some firms might adopt what appear to be more or less sophisticated HRM strategies. Sophisticated HR is typical in settings that require the management of complex tasks. Here, employment contracts include measures such as good pay and working conditions, employer investment in training and development, open ended (i.e., long term) employment contracts, and employment security. In contrast, low task complexity produces a short term HRM strategy that is often characterised by poor pay and conditions, short term contracts, high turnover, and low levels of training and development in human capital. These strategies are also mediated by power. For example, where there is low task complexity employers hold the dominant power position because workers can generally be replaced easily on the open market. However, if workers are able to organise collectively they might be able to shift the balance of power somewhat, and improve their terms and conditions of employment.

Werner Nienhüser has developed a keen interest in how workers seek to gain or maintain power to contest the employment relationship, and what role institutional mechanisms play in this process. For example, he has conducted research on German works councils. Works councils are a noteworthy feature of the German industrial relations system that provides dual representation of worker interests. Thus, works councils operate within firms, focussing on improving the quality of working life. This leaves trade unions to provide collective employee representation on an industry-wide basis. His work on works councils highlights the importance of this formal, institutional mechanism that provides workers with an organisational “voice”.

In recent years voice has become a very popular term in employment relations. In his classic study, Hirschman (1970: 30) defined voice as “any attempt at all to change rather than to escape from an objectionable state of affairs”. Using the leadership example above, voice is akin to the way that workers are able to create organisational stories that become the employees’ narrative. Institutional voice mechanisms, such as works councils or unions, give workers “formal” voice, and the capacity to use their voice to contest the management narrative. Without voice mechanisms, workers have less capacity to have a say over issues that affect their working lives. In practice, a lack of voice means that dominant narratives are not challenged, and alternative perspectives remain marginalised. Before we can analyse the narratives that workers can disseminate, they must actually have a voice. Voice precedes narrative.

Increasingly, there is an awareness that the provision of voice is part of a bundle of practices that feature in workplaces that generate high levels of productivity. Those who advocate voice argue that it encourages greater organisational commitment and, in particular, that voice is a necessary precondition for employees to offer rather than withhold their discretionary effort. ER scholars are now using the term silence to denote an absence of voice (Van Dyne, Ang & Botero 2003: 1361). Silence is linked to the lack of willingness of employees to participate fully in the work process and to express ideas about how work practices can be improved for the benefit of workers and management.
Werner Nienhüser’s work points to the importance of understanding the dynamics of worker representation and voice in an era when employment relations systems are evolving and where traditional mechanisms such as unions and works councils are in decline. Indeed, it is the evolution of employment relations systems that highlights both growing similarity and some persistent diversity across national systems that underlies the interest of scholars such as Werner Nienhüser who publish in the area of comparative employment relations (Nienhüser & Warhurst 2010). Even countries such as Germany, that have traditionally provided very strong mechanisms of employee representation, are not immune from these trends. A critical issue then for both ER and HRM is how best to provide voice mechanisms, and what type of voice will achieve the best results for employees and management.

In practice there are a wide variety of voice arrangements, and they have mixed results in terms of how they operate and whose interests they promote. One way to conceptualise this is to see voice mechanisms as fulfilling one of three fundamentally different purposes. Some schemes are about providing or sharing information. A simple example might be a suggestion box which allows workers to anonymously provide information and advice to management. Information from management may come in many forms, and is designed to let employees know what management has decided. At a deeper level, some schemes engage workers in important organisational decisions through a process of consultation “Management are informing you that we wish to change X, and we will listen to your views about this. However, the decision to do X is ultimately up to us.” Finally there are voice structures that allow workers to participate in, and potentially contest, organisational decision-making. While the schemes that provide information or consultation are often management-inspired voice mechanisms, those that give workers rights to joint decision-making usually emerge through independent employee representation, and are often backed by statutory rights that support works councils, trade unions, and collective bargaining. And so, as ER systems are evolving in a way that reduces the reach of trade unions, works councils and collective bargaining, an important issue to confront is whether voice mechanisms will continue to be able, in Hirschman’s words, to give workers the ability to change, rather than escape from, an objectionable state of affairs.

5. Conclusion

Werner Nienhüser reminds us that organisations are comprised of a plurality of interests, that while management control most resources power is contested, that interest groups seek to maximise power to promote a narrative that supports their interests, and that workers can sometimes organise effectively to challenge the dominance of the management/leadership narrative. Ordinarily leadership, power, narrative, critical studies, employment relations, HRM and employee voice come from discrete ontological genres. However, the scholarship of Werner Nienhüser gave us the opportunity to bring them together under one umbrella. By doing so, we hope to commence a richer investigation of these important and as-yet un-integrated aspects of organisational life.
References


