

Stories of Leader Identity: A Narrative Investigation of Leader Identity Construction

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Abstract

This study explores leader development processes as the narrated construction of leader identity. The paper builds on the notion that identity can be perceived as narratively constructed e.g. that we are constantly involved in constructing stories about who we are and that these stories are both constitutional and constructing for our sense of identity (Bruner, 2002). The paper has two foci: firstly the study unfolds at a micro level how a Danish Executive uses narratives to construct his leader identity. Second it applies an analytical framework inspired by Narrative Therapy as a methodological approach on the subject of leader identity construction. The study aims to contribute to theory building on the identity construction process per se and to provide a new analytical frame for investigating identity processes. The findings suggest that central features of leader identity construction are closely linked to narrative practice and to narrative forms. The paper indicates that a narrative oriented approach can enrich the investigation of identity processes because it crystallizes the essentially narrative nature of our on-going construction of selves in various distributed situations over time. Furthermore the paper illustrates that narratives are important to identity change processes and it stipulate that the act of narration in-itself can be understood as an identity construction process.

Introduction

In the last decade a narrative approach has progressively been applied as a way to understand organizations and identity construction with a strong process orientation (Czarniawska, 1997, 2004, McAdams, 1993). Narrative studies with an individual focus have investigated life and autobiographical stories and narrative studies with an organizational focus have investigated organizational identity and storytelling, but most studies have not focused on the actual constructors of identity or identity processes per se. The focus of this paper is to explore narrative identity construction of a leader and second, to apply a narrative analytical framework building on core concepts from narrative therapy. I employ process directed concepts from narrative therapy;

dominant stories and preferred stories, re-authoring conversations and statement of position maps, the framework will be described in depth in the method section (White & Epston, 1990, White, 1992).

This paper is based on the preliminary findings of a longitudinal three year research project. In the study I interview a group of five Danish executives six months after they attended a leader development program (Executive training Program, ETP). As an organizational psychologist I also observed, and facilitated the group's development processes at the one year program. The data are viewed as the leaders' retrospective interpretations and stories about their construction processes as leaders over time but co-constructed and re-narrated in the research interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). A narrative analysis of one of the leaders is presented based on an in depth semi structured interview. The following section presents the key concepts of identity, identity work, and narrative identity in more detail. The second section presents the methodological framework from narrative therapy. The third section includes the narrative analysis of the story of leader identity construction. The final section discusses the findings and possible methodological implications for future research.

The Identity Concept Constructed

The conceptualization of identity is a big story to tell, and this section is directed at providing a short overview of themes and research findings relevant to this particular study. The identity concept and identity research has taken a tremendous turn following the emergence of the modern and postmodern paradigms and with the introduction of social constructions theory (Gergen, 1997, Giddens, 1991). According to Giddens the concept of individual identity is in itself a typical institution of "high modernity" and persists through an ability to narrate one's life, formulate it into a narrative composed of terms that will be accepted by a relevant audience" (1991: 410). The paradigm introduces language and narratives as central means to connect the individual with other people, with human culture and with the larger historically based human foundation (Gergen, 1997). The turn has had at least four distinctive characteristics which impacts the conceptualization of what identity is about and how it is developed.

These are described as a turn from universality to variance, from continuity to discontinuity, from coherence to contradiction and tension, and from individual to relational conceptions of identity (See Mishler, 1999: 91). Identity is no longer a-priori given or something you have (own) but is within the postmodern paradigm a social construction, this turn affects the conceptualization and investigation of identity shifting from essentialist orientations to constructive and discursive oriented studies and shifting from monolithic conceptualizations to concepts of multiplicity of identities (Sveningson and Alvesson, 2003: 1164). Today there is a growing interest in investigating identity and the forming of identity within organizational studies, but most often identity construction processes are implied by theories more than being their main focus (Ibarra, 1999). The literature primarily focuses on organizational techniques for meaning making to shape identity in the organizational image and focuses less on how organizational members themselves construct identity (Pratt and Foreman, 2000). Ibarra's (1999) study of identities and career change identify the gap in identity process research; "Despite consensus in the socialization literature that identity changes accompany work role changes, the process by which identity evolves remains under explained" (1999.765). Identity research has traditionally focused

on roles and categorization processes. Hall (1995) operates with the term “sub identities” to describe how individuals transcend into new roles by aligning or fitting relevant sub-identity aspects to particular social roles, without describing how identity change in this transition process. Research by Nicholson (1984), West, Nicholson and Arnold (1989) focus on when identities are likely to change or to focus on the outcome of individual change but still the bridging processes of antecedents and outcomes which are important to identity construction, are left relatively unspoken (Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann, 2006:236).

In summary; The emerge of the post modern era indicates a shift in paradigm which poses new implications for how to understand, conceptualize and eventually study the subject of identity. The post modern paradigm implies that human beings are seen as active subjects, who construct their reality and themselves through language in social interactions and exchange in different contexts. Within this paradigm there is no objective truth and importance is to study the meaning people ascribe to their experiences. Individual identity is socially constructed in the sense that individual identity and self is simultaneously the result and an on-going process of construction in specific social relations and social contexts it signifies a identity construction process where the use of language fundamental (Giddens, 1991; Gergen, 1997).

Identity Work

The relatively new field of identity work research have been denoted by the work of Alvesson (2003) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) They define identity work: “as people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening and revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (2003: 1165). It implies that social categories are not just given or passively selected but emerge from individuals’ active construction processes. As an example gender might be identified by the biological sex but the meaning of gender to the individual is a social construct as our ideas about gender identities reflect historic, cultural and idiosyncratic construction processes. The definition punctuates that identity work is the activities an individual engages with to achieve a sense of self; a simultaneous sense of coherence and uniqueness. The authors distinguish between work identity and narrative self-identity. Work identity they characterize by emerging in a work context and by being more changeable than the narrative self-identity. Individual work identity is a construction of several managerial identities, and different identity constructs often contradict or conflict among each other, or the work identity conflicts in regard to the narrative self-identity. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) stress that specific contextual factors (e.g. complex, fragmented context, crises and transitions) will heighten individuals’ awareness of the constructed quality of self-identity and compel more concentrated identity work (2003:1165). This makes situations where identity is challenged, and where self-doubt and self openness are likely to be present eminent contexts in which to investigate identity work of individuals. The work identity construct is referred to as a process of: “ongoing struggles around creating a sense of self and providing temporary answers to the questions of; who am I and what do I stand for. They provide a more elastic definition of identity and role in which they pose to take seriously the role but not reduce work to being nothing but roles. They construct the subject as a location for contradictory discourses, implying that a variety of managerial identities are possible and that tensions and contradictions are likely to be present among them. They suggest that the constant struggle among managerial identities creates a temporary view of the self, where certain identity versions (story-lines) dominate others,

depending on the context. The organizational context of the leader, the organizations expectations and identity regulations will give rise to leaders identity work. Leaders will influence back on the organizations role expectations and regulations, and this integrative process will essentially give leaders' agency in the reconciliation of multiple managerial identities, which is in fact identity work in the work setting. This research approach builds on these identity work studies and pursues identity construction as interactive, complex and more problematic than the relatively straightforward adoption of a role. I place individual agency at the center for constructing identity and individual identity is seen as incontrovertible constructed in relations, situations and organizational contexts.

Narrative Identity

In the work-oriented setting narration can be understood as an important means of constructing and altering identities. (Gergen, 1997, Ibarra, 2005, Linde, 1993, McAdams, 1993). The humanistic oriented psychologist McAdams (1993) suggests that narratives are inner personal stories that are made public by being told. In the view of narrative identity self perception is not seen as an individual's personal and private cognitive structure but as a discussion of the self – as an act in a language which is accessible in the public sphere. This shifts the understanding from cognitive conceptual categorization towards the self as narrative as a story that is rendered meaningful in the ongoing social relations. Stories thus reflect their sources and circumstances, but they also take shape through their active narration (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000: 106). This implies that people construct themselves by communicating different narratives about who they are. How to tell the story of your self is also a prescription for how to construct one's life as Bruner proposed in *Acts of Meaning* (1990:206) indicating that we communicate a self through the narratives we choose to tell about ourselves especially experiences of life transitions or traumas. Often narratives are structured around a central theme or are told in a certain genre that stresses the meaning or the point of a certain narrative of self. In narrative therapy this is called story-lines or dominant stories, which significantly influence the actual life and actions of the narrator (White & Epston, 1990).

“How individuals recount their histories –what they emphasize and omit, their stance as protagonists or victims, the relationship the story establishes between teller and audience –all shape what individuals can claim of their own lives. Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned. (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, p.1)

Coherence is a critical element in constructing identity, and it is important in narrative studies for several reasons. First the assumption that a story has to be meaningful depends on its coherence e.g. that the different parts of the story fit together in some consistent way is a criterion for the meaningfulness of the story. Second, interview respondents to some degree use this criterion to evaluate whether meaningfulness is achieved in their own individual life story, like an index for positive valued identity (Mishler, 1999:14). Narratives establish and restore identity continuity when an individual is faced with change or discontinuity. The individuals' ability to establish coherence within a story and the ability to demonstrate a coherent life story is essential for a sense of identity. A narrative has five central elements according to Bruner (1990);

1) Narratives are accounts of events occurring over time.

- 2) Narratives are retrospective interpretations of sequential events from a certain point of view.
- 3) Narratives focus on human action –the actions of the narrator and the actions of others.
- 4) Narrating is part of identity construction processes.

Linde (1993) propose that a coherent life story demonstrates that our lives are a series of unfolding related and linking events that make sense for the individual. To establish coherence depends on the extent to which the narrative demonstrate continuity and causality. Continuity is implied when the fundamental essence of the protagonist remains the same even though the situation has changed. Causality is established when the reasons used to describe the protagonist trajectory is perceived as sufficient or understandable (Ibarra, 2005:3). Sveningson & Alvesson (2003) propose that both managerial and non-managerial identities can be thought of as images and knowledge that will be mobilized in the managers' inner and external dialogue, thus building on the managers' broader specter of a narrative self-identity. They refer to McAdams (1993) narrative self-identity; McAdams has conceptualized self and identity as ingrained in the narrative expression of a personal life story: *"If you want to know me, you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insights into the meaning of my own life, then, I, too must come to know my own story"* (1993:11). Indicating that every time a leader tells the story about who he is as a leader – it is an act of identity construction. The construction process is expressed in language by telling stories to someone and narratives can be understood as the socially shared part of identity. Czarniawska defines narrative as a form of social life, a form of knowing and as a form of communication. Following a social constructionist view she suggest to see; "identity construction as a continuous process of narration where both the narrator and audience formulate, edit, applaud and refuse various elements of the ever-produced narrative." (2004:412). Czarniawska claims that individuals as well as organizational identity are constructed in discourse and in narratives, and she suggest that identity emerge through the narrative processes taking place in the interaction between people and denotes that social interaction is a place where identity is constantly being constructed and challenged in an dynamics way, as such human beings are social constructors and organizations are social constructs.

In summary the premise of the paper is that people organize and give meaning to their lived experience through the storying of experience. When people perform stories they express selected aspects of their lived experience, and the stories are constitutive –in shaping lives and relationships. To story experiences we depend on language in order to ascribe meaning to our lived experiences in the culturally and historically founded language we have at hand. This way we constitute our lives, identities and relationships in language (White & Epston, 1990). People continuously engage in identity work to re-construct and restore a sense of identity continuity in a narrative form –in stories. Identity work is especially prone when people are faced with change or discontinuity and the ability to establish coherence within a story and the ability to perform a coherent life story is vital for a sense of identity.

Method

This method section introduces narrative as an analytical approach to investigate identity work; the narrative approach operates at four different levels in this study:

Narratives are identity constitutions, are constructed to understand and make sense of who we are and what we do, in this sense narratives are *results*. Human life and interaction can be understood as ontologically and epistemologically narrative. That we understand ourselves and our common world through narratives and narration is constructing identity. When someone tells stories of who he is as a leader, he is constructing his leader identity in narrated form. Besides narratives are results or products, when we understand the empirical data we investigate as products.

Narratives are *processes*, are constructed constantly and each time anew, in this sense narratives are on-going process and identity work. Narration is *constructed content* in the sense that when the leaders tell the story of their leadership identity construction they are constructing anew. The research intervention is creating new constructions and as a researcher I am an active part in the construction process (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Data is not gathered like mushrooms but is co-produced in the interview settings. The study of narrative identity construction is thus a study of stories and of the interaction in the interview where stories are co-produced.

Narrative is a choice of methodological orientation to approach a certain phenomenon. A narrative analysis is an *analytical method* to approach a field of study - this paper uses analytical structures and categories from narrative therapy to analyze and organize the data.

Narratives are developmental devices in this sense narratives are actively and intentionally used with the aim of reconstructing identity –of inducing change processes. Narratives are used as a *developmental device* in narrative therapy but may also occur spontaneously as leaders engage in dialogue with others about their leadership and leader aspirations.

Narrative Therapy; a Process Oriented Analytical Frame

Narrative therapy was designed to assist individuals and families in constructing alternative life stories, it is directed at facilitating identity processes in the therapeutic setting and offers a terminology that could be beneficial for investigating identity processes in other settings. Mainly because narrative therapeutic frameworks captures construction processes per se, and thereby provide new (to the field) conceptual models to illustrate identity processes. It is founded on an awareness and sensitivity to power structures and dominant discourses and it is concerned with individual agency and respectfully approaches the meaning making of the individual in social context.

Narrative therapy originates from The Dulwich Centre in Australia where Michael White and David Epston have central roles in developing methods and theories of narrative therapy from the field of family therapy and community work. Narrative therapy is concerned with the stories we live by –the stories we carry with us about who we are and about what is important to us. Narrative therapy did not evolve from psychological discourse but has since 1989 developed as a synthesis from the work of several social theories (See Besley, 2002; Payne, 2000; White, 1989, 1992; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Narrative therapy is inspired by Foucault' thinking on power and knowledge and philosophically grounded in post structuralism. Narrative therapy has developed a terminology that describes the process and sequence of its therapeutic processes (Monk *et al*, 1997; Payne, 2000; White, 1992, 1995; White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 1999). Narrative

therapy focuses on how personal stories are authored and how stories can be re-authored with emphasis placed on the intentions, dreams, and values that have been important in guiding a persons' life. The story is the basic unit of experience in narrative therapy. Stories guide how people think; act and feel and how people make sense of their experiences and most importantly stories organize the experiences of people's life. Aspects of identity are organized in working categories of identities, beliefs, values, and principles of life including commitments, intentions, and hopes. In addition narrative therapy focuses on the shaping moments of people life, the turning-points and significant relationships as they are remembered in a conversation.

Dominant Stories, Preferred Stories and Re-authoring Conversations

In Narrative therapy only experiences that are part of a larger story will have significant impact on people's life and therefore narrative therapy will try to build the plot which connects a person's life together. This involves finding and amplifying the "unseen story-lines", a dominant story is often a problem saturated narrative, for some people it can seem as if their identity is dominated by one or a few very dominant story-lines. The dominant story will be reflected in the choice of content but also in the rhetorical form and in the way the individual choose to structure stories e.g. in the form of telling (Riessman, 1993). In narrative therapy the following assumptions about individuals and the experience of problems or problem stories prevail: 1) the dominate stories in which individuals story their experience do not sufficiently represent their lived experience. 2) There will be significant and vital aspects of individuals lived experience that contradicts the dominate stories.

Re-authoring conversations can be defined as a conversation in which the person is invited to link events of their lives in sequence through time according to a theme or a plot and personal experiences are often strikingly storied by others (White & Epston, 1990). Re-authoring implies the activity of identifying neglected aspects and events and evolve them in alternative story lines. Narrative therapy suggests that gaps exist in dominant stories, and that no story will dominate every aspect of an individual identity. It is from the search and exploration of these gaps, that stories can be enriched and thickened in order to make way for the emerge of alternative identity stories and new identity stories can be re-authored. In the process of a re-authoring conversation the facilitator will use questions as scaffolds to encourage people to fill the gabs. The scaffold is constructed around two important concepts: the landscape of action and the landscape of identity. These concepts originate from Bruner's (1986) conceptualizing that people's stories of life and personal identity can be understood to produce a certain "landscape of mind". The landscape of action composed of events, linked in sequence, through time, and according to a plot. The landscape of identity is composed of identity conclusions shaped by contemporary identity categories of culture, and scaffolding questions help the alternative landscapes of mind to be described, to be told and to evolve (White, 2002). In the coming data analysis I have identified and structured significant stories in storylines. A storyline contains a distinct meaning (sense making) about the identity constitution or about identity construction experiences or events. Storylines encompasses two or more stories that are distributed in sequence in time. Storylines can be related more strongly to an identity domain; storylines can be personal, relational and organizational oriented. This paper aims to explore construction processes, data is analyzed in an analytical frame inspired by narrative therapy' re-authoring conversation, identifying problem stories and preferred stories in the leaders' narrative. The positions of the stories and storylines will be analyzed in a

statement of position map to illustrate construction patterns and construction processes in a time sequence.

Milton' Story – A Story of Leader Identity Construction

Milton is in his early forties and the oldest brother of two. He and his brother Eric are heading a middle-sized production company. The company was founded and has been run by their father for a decade. The family business was always an integrated part of Milton and his brother lives since childhood. Milton and his brother returned to the company after years of perusing education and working with other companies. They start working in jobs with functional responsibilities and employee contact for some years. Then the father, who is described as an entrepreneurial and old school authoritarian leader figure, decides to hand over leadership of the company to his sons and stay only as head of the board. They officially take over leadership and divide the top management functions between the two. The company manufactures and delivers textile to health care and service sector and the take over period is marked by strong competition and internally cost cutting and rationalization activities. Five years later the brothers decide to participate in the same open enrollment leadership development program called Executive Training program (ETP). In my job as an industrial psychologist and consultant I was part of the facilitator team for the program. The two brothers participated in two different core-groups at the program and I was the main facilitator for Milton's group during the one year program (four modules and 11 days).

Rationalizing the Business and laying off people

Shortly after Milton and his brother took over, the company lost two important customers and they were forced to rationalize the production and lay off 30 people. This experience is a turning point for Milton. He describes at length the event and explicitly the toll it had on him emotionally and how he afterwards concluded (landscape of identity) that he would be better off as a leader if he had more distance to others. He narrates how distance would help him to make better decisions and act smarter as a leader by keeping a distance to others he would avoid conflicts. The conflicts Milton refers to might relate more to conflicts he experience within / between identity construct; conflicts about how to be the leader and about how to handle an emotional stressful situation. The employees are described as more tearful and sad than conflict creating. Based on this experience Milton concludes; that it is better to keep a distance to others when you are a leader. Then his decisions will not be influenced by his emotions and he will minimize feeling emotionally uneasy. The experience of firing employees starts a construction process in which Milton creates and starts legitimizing keeping a distance and a narrative in which the employees are gradually objectified is initiated. *M: We were forced to rationalize radically in the company and the worst I have ever tried was –I think half a year after we took over - we were to lay off 30 people – and that was a mean experience. It is some of the worst you can ever experience, but when I look back it is also some of the most educational I have been through and as a result we relatively quickly found out how to handle situations –that is being the smart in stead of taking all the fights all the time (1).*

G: Mm so what do you think, if we stick to this situation of firing all these people, what did you become aware of or what specifically did you learn from that

M: (pause) that other people have feelings I think – I did it consciously and I don't actually know why I did it, because I felt terrible doing it, but I took everybody to my office for a conversation and explained what was happening and why it happened. Hmm-and there I got an experience, someone would start crying – and that was not very fun at the age of 30 to sit and tell adults so to speak, who are 20 years older than me. That was a tuff experience but I also learned a lot.....now that I sit and think about it I think that what surprised me the most is – that I have grown up with the company, and I have seen my father how he is so because of that work was to me something that was just there –and then get this experience of how important it really was for a lot of people, that took me by surprise and how emotionally people react when something unexpected happens (4) ...No doubt I got wiser by it, not to get involved in other people and of cause that is good you can create that distance and relate to things on a distance from above but on the other hand this has been one of my biggest problems that I consciously have kept a distance to everything. (3)

G: You began to create more distance or?

M: It is as if I began to legalize it –that it was ok

This interview fraction shows how new narratives are emerging in the interview setting. When Milton says “now that I sit and think about it “ and thereafter develop a new narrative about what his relation is with work and this is significantly influenced by the business being a family business and his leader identity narrative is evolving to include and emphasize the meaning of family business. The family owned business punctuates another aspect in Minton's story; he had never imagined work could be taken away much like the notion that you cannot loose your family. Growing up in the company hallways, the company is just there for Milton like the air he breathes. The emotional strong expressions of people loosing their jobs, many of whom had been in the company for longer than he has (lived) surprises becomes a turning point in constructing his leader identity into what he later came to think of as his dominating problem story. Milton is reinforcing distance beyond his leader identity, when he indicates that he consciously kept a distance to everything indirectly stating that the distance storyline has become a way of being in the world not limited to relations in the working life or limited to certain relations. The second rationalizing experience Milton describes as less emotional and his distance to others have evolved to an extent where other people are handled without much emotion and where employees are objectified and have been transformed into functional artifacts of the company. This makes him feel emotionally more confident when he acts as a leader and in carrying out the second firing.

In the retrospective account, Milton is not concerned with this leader identity construct as causing him any specific problems. “*I was, I had become in relation to work extremely - hmmm I had become extremely systematic in my way of seeing things, everything suddenly had turned into functions and numbers.*” (5) Later in the interview Milton adds another identity storyline to this storyline; he connects the story of being distant to others with a life long storyline of feeling shy or uncomfortable by being the focus of attention. He anchors the story of shyness in the past as well as in the present as something significant to him as a person (narrative self-identity). The storyline of being shy thus enhances and supports a construction of a leader identity where people are kept at a distance and where people might also be kept away by him expressing strong emotions; anger, impatience and hardness. This storyline of being hard and expressing anger in relations will due to limited space not be included in the analysis.

M: ...After the first round of rationalizing in the production I began to feel that I had become, I wouldn't call it shy of people, but I have always been very shy both as a child (A7) and still I am actually shy, so I feel comfortable to be the one who stands in the back. I don't have to be the one in front....and then it was of cause a brutal experience to sit in front of all these people and you know you have to give them bad news and that is why I became a little, no not a little - I became very cold in my relation to other people... (6)

The Boucher and the Sunshine

The two brothers Milton and Eric had both agreed to attend the ETP program. They are not far from each other in age but they come across as two very different individuals. Where Milton narrates himself as a shy more introverted person his brother Eric is experienced as talkative, extrovert and social. Milton stories about his leadership relate to many stories about his relation to his brother and their problems in running the family business together. *M:...the worst is that we told each other openly that I was the Boucher and he was the one to spread a little joy afterwards (laughs) and I don't know but we kind of lived with it - the problem was that we were running a business, so we began to get more irritated with each other. He thought I was way too serious and I thought that he was too funny. I think that has been the core in all the conflicts that we have had, those roles we gave each other in the beginning began to irritate us. He thought I was over-particular and lengthy and I couldn't take he didn't think about things before rushing into action. (8)*

Milton describes how the brothers are stereotyping each other, how they are casting each other as opposites and in thin roles, it is a perfect example of a “thin” dominate identity story. The two brothers have had a whole family life before entering the family business to role-casting each other in various limited or thin roles, as we often do in families, where children find particular “identity niches”. When entering a shared leadership the stereotyping and limited expectations influence and have consequences for more people and prove to be detrimental to leading a successful business. Milton story their relationship as polarization in terms of being; fun/serious, fast/slow, reflection/action. This indicate the stereotyped, limited and opposite thin identity constructions they hold and Milton does not describe any communalities or nuances either of his own or of his brother's identity narrative. Thin stories are the hallmark of dominating stories in narrative therapy and are perceived as limiting and removing people from their actual experience, eventually Milton begins to feel a need and wish for something else for the construction of a richer story for him and for his brother. Just before attending the development program they are progressively stereotyping each other and are escalating conflicts. According to Milton the conflicts and disagreements are influencing the future of the business and are de-motivating the employees “*either we go separate ways –or we find some ways to solve it*”. The two brothers are running the company without dialogue. In the interview I asked Milton if they talked about their relationship or their common leadership of the company. Milton said never, when asked for how long, he responded “*Well, about five years*”. They had been running the business single handed without ever taking about how.

The issue of the family business cannot exclusively account for this but also the stereotyping identity stories might have restrained them to start the conversation as it can seem almost insurmountable to find a common ground. The conversation might never get started before a

serious threat is present –like the threat to the company and their relational conflicts. The discussion of leadership and leadership style might also touch upon the leadership of the former CEO which would be a discussion of their father (and probably at least indirectly his role as a father) so for obvious reasons the road to communicating about relations and power can be more sensitive in family business than elsewhere. On this background Milton had begun to question his leader identity and to construct it as a problem story, a problem story with consequences for his private life and for his leader job and identity. Milton recognize his leader behaviors are repeating patterns of his farther, which is not in accordance with his preferred story, and the story about who he likes to be as a leader. In retrospect Milton seems able to detect elements of his problem story and relate them to different relations; his brother, his farther, the employees and his private life. Though he has not a clear or developed narrative about what his aspirations are as a leader, what the alternative story look like. His mapping of the problem stories and their consequences are dominating his identity construct at this time and there is a pressure to change from outside and from with in.

We Were Like We Were: We Just Had to Understand Other People a little Better

M:....because our biggest problem was in regard to our personnel -we thought, we were going on this course to learn to understand people, by that we meant understand other people better – I don't think we at that time had reached the point where we could see that we were the problem (12) In this story the surprising plot is that their expectation about where the problem is located moves from outside/others to a inside/me. Milton explains how he had used up the goodwill of the younger generation and had managed to de-motivate the old generation employees. He begins to story his thinking about leadership in terms of relations and communication and goes on to describe how self-knowledge can be seen as a preceding step to understanding others.

They Always Say: Before and After

The following make evident the full range of domains in which Milton has reconstructed identity, due to limited space this section does not include interview interaction nor Milton' more extensive elaborations on each identity story . *M: Well, it has been wonderful –I have never ever thought that– I think that I have used a lot of resources on having to be grumpy or be cold -to be Boss and that I am not anymore, I am much more relaxed in relation to how things are going, not that I am passive but I react more – what can I say I take the day more as an experience, a good experience, when new things are coming I can learn. Before all the time I had to find something to learn because then there was something I hadn't thought about. So in a way I think that I have turned it around and then I have gotten much more energy towards people and how they work and not the opposite like it was before. And that results in that I am completely different, I am much more relaxed, which I wasn't before (30).*Continuously Milton have challenged himself into doing what “is not like me” (the dominate identity story) in pursuing something else (the alternative story). Milton do not describe a specific goal but his agency and activities seems to be driven by a indefinable feeling of being; more relaxed, feeling more capable and of surprising himself by doing what he never thought he could. He abolishes the thin and dominating storyline, in his narrative described as processes of continuous agency sustained over time.

Milton' stories imply that he is actively engaged in identity work and that this process includes an important insight for Milton in realizing “he can be more that he thought he could”.

The dominant story has cracks and his identity construct can be enriched. *M: Yes, there is –I mean it is a 100% that I for a long time have underrated my own abilities, and kind of used it as an excuse to not get myself into something that I had not 100% control over from the start and that is a bit aggravating because that is the way you learn(22).* He is engaged in many challenging new experiences; entering the board of a local hotel, director in kindergarten, and accepting invitations to socially exposed events like receptions. He integrates new daily routines; smiling, laughing, walking around and being patient. Identity work is still going on; the alternative identity still is enmeshed with feelings of insecurity and discomfort. Milton has established a “dialogue” with himself about what to do in specific situations; the unthinkable have become thinkable and thereby made new alleys of identity constructions available. *M:… and I still don’t feel good about it -but I can just feel that it is becoming less and less a problem to me, - and then it becomes easier to take the decision, now I can think about it and then do it – before it was completely unthinkable and I would have done everything I could to not get myself into such a thing.*

This story contains both reference to conscious processes and to doing without thinking, he mixes past tense and present which conveys how identity construction process is still prominent in the localized situation. *M: And I have done it very consciously, you see before I was world champion in, I mean before we started this course, if I was going to something then I could find the first 10 excuses for why I shouldn’t do it – and especially if I was to do something with others, if I should do something with others then I had a sea of excuses for not doing it – and that I have tried to turn up side down – I am still trying to do it – now I just do it (19).* Milton’ identity work and intensive re-construction of identity are evident for the employees, they call it; “before and after”. He explains that the employees openly express that they are dealing with two different people and their recognizing the process and feedback. Milton describes what it means to him:

M: To me it means that it is incredible difficult for me to fall back in the completely old role because now I see that when I get so much positive feedback , then it is because it is right what is happening now –and I also have employees that function so much better than before – and I have another more constructive dialogue with people when things do not happen as I would like them to –so in that way –I would not have wanted to work with me as a boss myself.

Constructing Narrative Identity from Milton’ Stories

Milton constructs his developmental journey as a leader retrospectively in the interview. In my analysis his narrative can be seen as constructing problems stories and preferred stories of leader identity. These stories can also be categorized as being predominately personal, relational or organizational oriented. Below I present an overview of the most significant stories from the interview, describing the sense making of the problem stories and their related consequences and the re-construction into preferred stories as it is storied by Milton.

Table 1. Stories in Milton’ Identity Construction Process

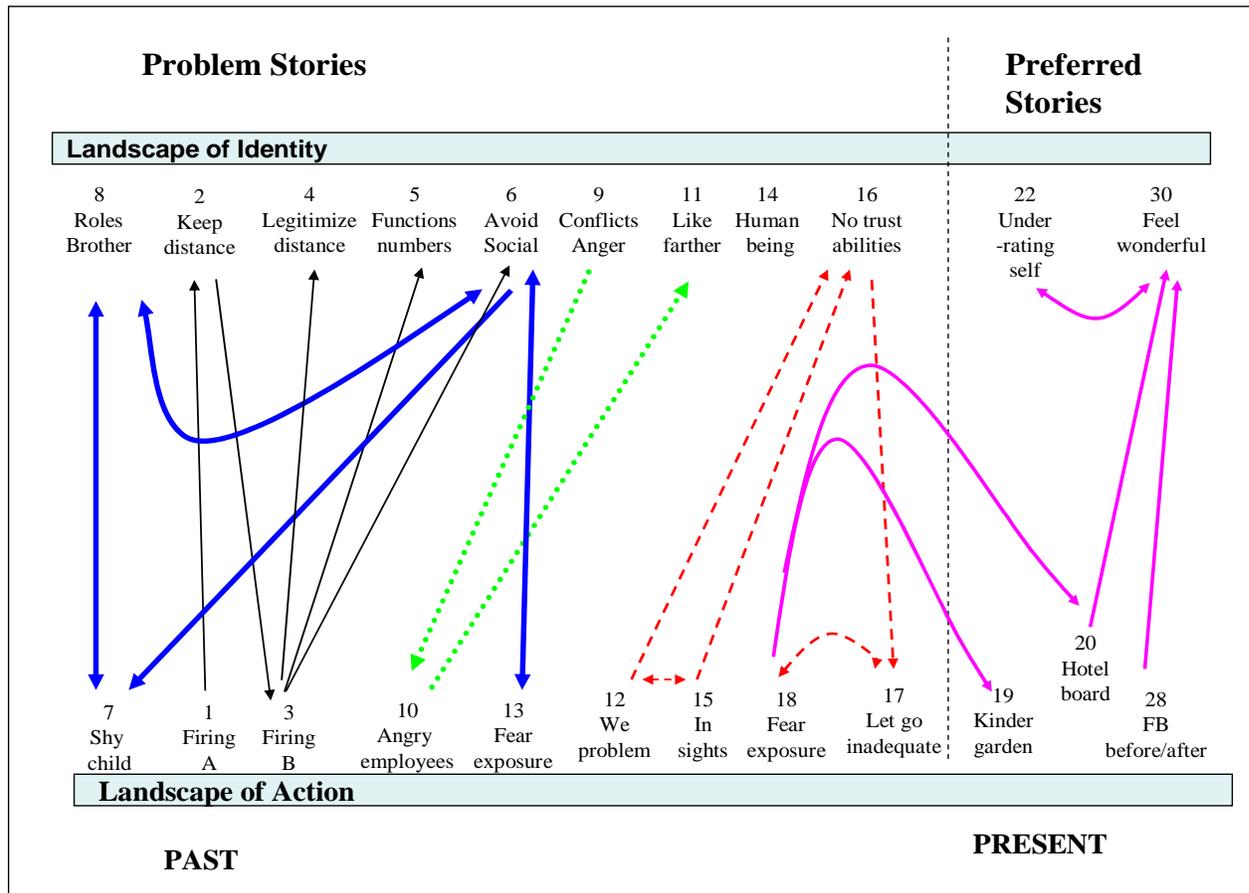
	Problem Stories	Consequences	Preferred Stories
Personal Stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shy, avoid social contact • Knows best how to do things, likes control • High tempered and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feels isolated • Works too much and at operational level • Stress and burn out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take on social positions - participate in socially challenging events • Feels more relaxed and at

	impatient <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cold and insensitive to others • Bombastic communication 	symptoms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of balance in life and feeling dissatisfied 	ease <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to others more • Trust own ability to interact and read other peoples • Still works to be patient
Relational Stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No social contact –no smiles • Stereotyped as the Boucher, the angry boss • Delegates and take the assignment away again 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No trust and no open dialogue • Avoidance and conflicts • De-motivating the new generation and scaring the old 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive feedback • Employees describe it as “before & after” • Informal small talk employees initiate talks • More dialogue and less conflicts • Communicate more w/ brother (walk & talk)
Organizational Stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear roles • One dimensional and rigid roles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public disagreements • Social climate tense 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employee appraisal focus on listening • Social climate more relaxed and more humor

The narrative model, Statement of Position Map (Table 2) shows Milton’s identity construction in the interview composed from the stories and the storylines, stories are positioned on two landscape dimensions which in dialectic interaction are constructing Milton’s landscape of identity: 1) Landscape of identity, signifying identity construction processes related to conclusions or summaries about identity. 2) Landscape of action, signifies identity construction processes related to specific events or actions.

The storylines act upon each other and storylines can share the same story. Together storylines can be understood as constituting a narrative identity. Processes of change can be traced in storyline re-construction. Storylines can be told as problem stories or they can be told as preferred stories. Milton’s identity narrative is presented in five storylines composed of stories that together constitute an identity construction process.

Table 2. Statement of Position Map



1. The storyline of the distant leader analyzed in Rationalizing the Business and laying off people composed of stories; 1,2,3,4,5,6.
2. The storyline of identity as opposition and shyness analyzed in The Boucher and the Sunshine composed by stories: 6, 7, 8, 13 and the storyline of the angry boss: 9, 10, 11.
3. The storyline of self-knowledge analyzed in We Were like We Were: We Just Had to Understand Other People a Little Better composed by stories: 12, 15,16,17,18.
4. The storyline of the preferred identity, the relaxed socially skilled leader analyzed in They Always Say: before and after, composed of stories: 18, 19, 20, 22, 28, and 30.

Discussion

I focus the discussion on the narrative identity construction processes and the use of narrative methods. I briefly reflect on the co-production of data and summon on the application of concepts originating from narrative therapy as analytical framework for investigating identity construction processes of leaders. I argue that identity processes consists of the construction of

storylines. Storylines consist of related stories that are anchored in the landscape of action and/or in the landscape of identity. A storyline has a sense making quality and it has a significant meaning about identity which makes it distinct to other storylines. A storyline has a distinct meaning bearing quality; it communicates a distinct identity theme of importance to the individual. The storylines in combination construct the individual narrative identity construct.

The statement of position map illustrates how the stories of five different storylines are mapped in the landscape of action and identity progressively in the interview (the numbers) and positioned in historical time (along the two landscape axes). The preliminary data suggests that the extent to which problem stories are re-constructed into preferred stories vary among participants. Milton is an extreme case re-constructing the majority of his problem stories into preferred stories, whereas other leaders continue to construct their identity as pre-dominantly problem-stories which can be seen in my preliminary analysis of two other cases. The four analyzed storylines in Milton's narrative illustrate how identity is narratively related to different experiences, events and relationships in order to construct a coherent identity story.

Stories are positioned in the landscapes of identity or action and a storyline consists of at least one story in each of the two landscapes. Storylines can be constructed in the same landscape for example when the individual constructs more than one significant identity conclusion on the basis of one significant identity action, e.g. the second firing (story 3) is the outset of different identity conclusions (stories: 4+5+6) in the landscape of identity. Two or more storylines can share a story in the landscape of identity or in the landscape of action. The story (6) about Milton avoiding social contact is in my analysis contributing to both: the storyline of the distant boss and the storyline of the shy and socially uncomfortable boss analyzed in the section on stereotyped thin identities. Storylines differ from each other by being constructed and distinct in relation to specific identity themes. One example is the storyline of "the angry and short tempered boss" (stories: 9,10, 11) which is distinct from the storyline of "the shy and socially uneasy person". They share the same action story of "the firing experience" but two distinct and different storylines are evolved. The presentations of data in storylines are based on my analysis and my construction of meaning from the narrative material and some times the borders of the storylines are more fluctuating than sharp.

The use of a narrative methodological design involves a significant shift from unraveling what a phenomenon is to exhaustively focus on how the phenomenon is constructed or produced in the research setting and in the context of practice. The main reason for choosing this narrative approach is its strengths in nurturing the narrated, hermeneutic and social aspects of people and organizations interaction and the continuous knowledge and meaning construction taking place in these interactions and contexts (Czarniawska, 2004). Stories thus reflect their sources and circumstances, but they also take shape through their active narration" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000: 106). Co-production takes place in two areas: in the interaction in the interview and in the broader social context. The researcher and respondent relation becomes a central object of study as the place for knowledge production and communication, and the relational dynamic (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). I met Milton in a facilitator role at the leadership program and we have had more prolonged interaction than is usual for research relationships. The relationship has been asymmetrical, the facilitator and the participant likewise is interviewing an asymmetrical practice.

The context at the leader program introduced particular values and interaction norms; such as openness, feedback and exercising critical self-reflection. The program builds on a leadership discourse which value the relational aspects of leadership, this discourse, values and our relationship have probably strengthened the co-production of narratives that are personal, detailed and rich in describing also unfavorable characteristics and doubts. Scrutinizing the relationship it could be argued that Milton re-produces a certain expected leadership discourse, nevertheless the data appears credible and without distinct performance or impression management statements. On the contrary the narratives has a form that resounds a personal voice more than a reproduction of management discourse, they are complex and include idiosyncratic identity conclusions and actions that seems to be anchored in Milton's experiences and to be genuine to him.

Conclusion

In this paper identity is approached as a construction reflecting the context and social interaction under which it emerge. Identity is described in narratives and we make sense of ourselves in narrative form. At the same time narrating is a construction process by which new constructions of identity evolve. Narratives are both constitutional for identity and vehicles for identity change through the constant and inevitable construction processes that are in fact essential to our ontological and epistemological being. In this understanding re-authoring conversations are the re-construction of identity in stories from a certain point in time. Re-authoring conversations are as such identity work, the process of construction identity in narratives. This paper has applied a conceptual analytical frame based on central concepts from Narrative Therapy. This approach is justified partly by the lack of process oriented analytical frameworks that simultaneously preserves the meaning and sense-making qualities of narratives. This contribution is a step in developing methods to explore identity processes per se and future research must be done in order to penetrate the implications and possibilities of this methodological approach. In addition the exciting and yet rather undiscovered field of leader identity construction processes in narratives still lies open for future exploration.

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