WHERE IS THE ACTION?

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Abstract

Taking a set of narratives told about business action as the empirical starting-point, the paper looks at the different ways in which action is reconstructed. The overall research question asked is: How is business action reconstructed in our business narratives? The narratives analysed are collected from research on exchange relationships in the field of marketing, but also from other social sciences, using texts from e.g economist, rational choice approaches, anthropological approaches, historical aproaches, sociology of science, and more. To analyse how business actions are depicted in these different types of narratives, four narrative constructions are focused: plots, actors, time and space. The categorizations and analyses are summarized and followed by a set of concluding implications and suggestions for the use of narratives aiming to reconstruct business action in the making.

Introduction

How is action reconstructed in different types of narratives from the business field? The origin of this text was a reflection on business texts, on the variety of texts claiming to depict or represent "business action", i.e. business operations, processes and activities in the making. An issue raised concerns the translation process, i.e the way in which researchers approach the object in focus, businesss actions, and ultimately how these field studies in various steps are translated into stories of business action. As regards the first step, John Law (1994) describes the researcher's dilemma in that much of the time in the modern world we pass the time by formulating, reformulating and representing what has gone on elsewhere. This shoddiness of fieldwork he describes in the following way:

> "Obviously, I missed out on many important events during my fieldwork. Sometimes I could not be there. Sometimes it just seemed inappropriate – I never asked to attend personal appraisal interviews, appointment boards or other important personal rites of passage. Sometimes I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. And certainly, I did not collect materials that might have attracted other ethnographers with different interests. But, though I know, even by my own increasingly modest

standards, that the study is incomplete, I now see things differently: since there are discontinuities in place, and discontinuities in ordering, it follows that the largest part of the action is always being generated elsewhere." (p.47)

Accepting Law's experience as common also in business studies, how does it affect our stories from the field? Leaving the dreams of purity in descriptions of ongoing business actions behind, we end up with some methodological concerns. That is, we might need to understand our research on business actions as "a reflexive process of uncertain and provisional imputation", where the ordering process in which "we weave to and fro between traces and imputations" becomes important (ibid, p.50). Taking the final business narratives as starting-point, the paper brings up for discussion these and other methodological issues, including the use of narrative devices, to elaborate on the problem to capture business action.

Aim and Contents

The aim of this paper is to discuss a set of methodological issues, taking the narratives told about business action as an empirical starting-point. We started by asking ourselves how business action is reconstructed in our narratives? One puzzling aspect of this question concerned temporality and time: from what vantagepoint, internal or external, do authors describe actions, and with what temporal viewing direction and from what temporal vantegepoint are the actions described? A related question raised and discussed, concerned those who were acting: Who is actually acting, and what are the consequences of the narrator's view of who the "actor" is for the study of the business actions in focus? Third, there was also a concern with space: How are dimensions of space reconstructed in narratives on business action? An overarching question, finally concerned the ways in which the narrative constructions, the plots, were applied in the texts to capture the three dimensions in focus: actors, time and space.

The paper takes the three dimensions and the plots as starting point for an analysis of the ways in which actions are captured in narratives. Next, a few notes on the sources used are presented. It is followed by an introduction to the use of narratives in research in general. The three dimensions in focus - actors, time and space – are elaborated on,

followed by comments on some of the texts studied, applying these dimensions. A set of concluding implications and suggestions concludes the paper.

Sources

Empirically, the paper, draws on business narratives collected from research on exchange relationships in the field of marketing (e.g. Hammarkvist et al, Håkansson 1982, Håkansson & Snehota 1995)[1]. The paper collects narratives also from other social sciences, using texts from e.g economist, rational choice approaches (e.g Coleman 1994), anthropological approaches (e.g Geertz 1973), historical aproaches (e.g Chandler 1977), sociology of science (e.g Law 1994, Latour 1996), and more. It is part of a broader research project that purports to further explore the character of commercial exchange and interactions as part of business actions by using methods new to the field of marketing.[2]

On Narratives

Narratives, irrespective of type and category, appear to be the most common tool for translating observations of, and transferring knowledge on, action in general. Suffice it to say, and following the reasoning of Ricoeur (1988), in the hands of the reader a final narrative can be a path to increase our self-knowledge and our understanding of humans and their experiences of time:

> Do not human lives become more readily intelligible when they are interpreted in the light of the stories that people tell about them? And do not these "life stories" themselves become more intelligible when what one applies to them are the narrative models - plots - borrowed from history or fiction?...It is thus plausible to endorse the following chain of assertions: self-knowledge is an interpretation; self interpretation, in its turn, finds in narrative, among other signs and symbols, a

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[1] The paper also draws on more extensive, empirical cases, e.g from case narratives in IMP related doctoral theses.

[2] Andersson, P. and Kjellberg, H. (2000): "Making the Sale – a constructivist approach to the study of commercial exchange processes". Most importantly, the proposed project assumes a relationist ontology (Latour, 1986; Latour 1996) which denies the à priori distinctions which hitherto has characterised research on commercial exchanges, e.g. those between product development and exchange, product and service, actors (humans and organisations) and resources (knowledge, ideas, artifacts). Rather, such distinctions are seen as *outcomes of a construction process*, which to some extent stabilises the involved parties (the buyer and seller) as well as the content and form of the exchange, and leads to some agreement to engage in a commercial exchange. The aim of the project is to improve our understanding of commercial exchange processes.

privileged mediation; this mediation draws on history as much as it does on fiction, turning the story of a life into a fictional story or a historical fiction...(pp.241-274)

In the social sciences as a whole, there is a multitude of approaches to the study of and ways of telling stories about action. Looking closely at texts and narratives produced in the business field, each scientific area appears to have its own specific tilt. Some texts take the anthroplogical/managerial stance, trying to convey the view that the texts and authors represent "voices from the field", from the inside, i.e. letting the acting managers "speak in their own voices". Other texts take the opposite "scientific" stance, from outside, where the acting objects are mastered, interpreted and made mute, forcing the researcher's own voice on to the acting objects in focus. Inbetween the pure empricists' and the pure theorists' business narratives, other authors use other skills and tricks to translate their obeservations and data on business actions into texts and narrative structures. (to be continued)

Business Narrative Constructions: Plots, Actors, Time and Space

How, then, are business actions depicted in narratives? To simplify, many studies on business activities in e.g the industrial marketing field are conceptual, relying on empirical fragments ("illustrations") only, using them as "evidence" to support conceptual constructions. When these empirical fragments are turned into longer narrative texts, the "outside, retrospective hindsight" view becomes very common. That is, we are presented narratives of business actions from the researchers' view from outside, telling their stories retrospectively and chronologically about something that happened during specific, and delimited, periods of time, more or less distant from the socalled "present". Looking at these narratives as literary devices, one could probably argue that a rather limited set of perspectives and devices seems to be favoured.

To analyse how business actions actually are depicted in these different types of narratives, it was stated above that three major narrative dimensions are focused: actors, time and space. But first, a few comments on the overall construction of narratives, using the notion of plots to elaborate on various logisc for translating studies of action into a narative text.

Plots[3]

Identifying *events* is often one, important step in the creation of narratives, the very first step as described by Abbott (1992) in a discussion on case studies:

> Describing what the case does or endures is what philosophers of history call the colligation problem. It has several subparts. The first is identifying the events involved. Events, like concepts in more familiar methods are hypotheticals. Every historian considers dozens of indicating occurrences when deciding whether a given event has taken place...Moreover, these hypothetical events have varying duration and visibility.

The emergence of a narrative is often an indivisible, continuous process where a story and *plot* can be found successively when linking eg. theory with the empirical insights, the events. The events can put in a temporal sequence, a chronicle, a "prenarrative discourse" with a number of events as the "raw material" of history. Sometimes, there is a need for a perspective on temporality, a theory, to guide the narrative (Callinicos 1995, p. 91):

> As we have seen, modern historical discourse depends on an awareness of temporality, and of the radical differences it introduces between societies and epochs. Marc Bloch calls history ' "the science...of men in time". The historian does not think of the human in the abstract. His thoughts breathe freely the air of the climate of time'. But if this is right, then historical enquiry requires some conception of how human beings relate to their variable social contexts, and of the nature of and the differences between these contexts. In other words, it requires a social theory.

Using the words of Ricoeur (1991), the process of constructing the final story, *the operation of emplotment*, will be "a synthesis of heterogeneous elements". It will be a synthesis between the multiple events and incidents and the unified and complete story. The plot that has emerged serves to transform the many events into one story (ibid, p.21):

> In this respect, an event is more than something that just happens; it is what contributes to the progress of the narrative as well as to its beginning and to its end.

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[3] This part draws on: Andersson, P., 2001, "Notes on Industrial Network Research and Methodology", in: *Handbook on Business Marketing Research*, Vol 10 (accepted, forthcoming).

And with Ricoer's view, the emplotment is a synthesis in a more profound sense, because the final narrative composition will entail a *temporal* totality. The events are put in a temporal sequence, a chronicle, a "prenarrative discourse" with a number of events as the "raw material" of history. There is a need for a perspective on temporality, a theory, to guide the narrative (Callinicos 1995, p. 91):

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The process of producing a plausible story from social processes in terms of a complex case with its own plot(s) draws attention to the methodology of successive transformation of the emerging narrative. Three general problems can recur: the intersection of plots, periodization, and the fact that events take place at different contextual "levels" (Abbott 1992):

> The idea that we ought to think about social processes in terms of complex cases going through plots has its own problems, however. There are three principle ones. The first is that plots intersect. A given event has many immediate antecedents, each of which has many immediate antecedents, and conversely a given event has many consequents, each of which has many consequents...A related problem is the implicit assumption that subsections of the social process have beginnings, middles, and ends, rather than simple endless middles....the issue of plot as having beginning, middle, and end - the issue of periodization - is a major problem....How in fact do narratives explain? In a curious way the answer to this question doesn't much matter, for narrative is where positivists turn when reasoning in variables fails, and of course a particular narrative is what is rejected if an entailed set of variable relationships is implausible or incorrect...And the roving focus of the case/narrative approach has another distinct advantage over the population/analytic approach. It need make no assumption that all causes lie on the same analytical level...

A plot can finnaly emerge (ibid, p.64):

> ...events must then be arranged in a plot that sets them in the loose causal order that we generally regard as explanatory.

There emerges a story based on historical understanding, successively fusing different time horizons of the immediate past, the present and the immediate future (Gadamer 1960, pp.258-273):

> The horizon of the present is continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. The horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons. Understanding, rather, is always the fusion of those horizons we imagine to exist themselves.

Actors

A related question, resulting from our focus on the ways in which researchers approach, reconstruct and narrate business action, concerns the acting entities: Who is actually acting, and what are the consequences of the narrator's view of who the "actor" is for the study of business action? Certainly we are not exaggerating if we say that the vast majority of business narratives are told at some predetermined "level of analysis" and that the variety of actors tends to be limited to entities found at that level, e.g individuals acting within firms, firms acting within markets, industries or networks, etc. While this is usually how business narratives are told, there is, at the conceptual level, a relatively wide acceptance of the idea that actors come in different shapes and in different sizes (see e.g. Håkansson and Johanson, 1992; Lundgren 1991)

Linking to ideas of *variable geometries* (Latour 1996), the paper raises the question whether in fact important dimensions of - and interesting perspectives of - business actions are lost in many narratives, due to the predetermined, taken-for-granted, categorizations that are made of the actors. With a view of actors as variable, of temporality as multidimensional, and of the possibility of actions to span across time and space, a number of opportunities to tell our stories and write our narratives about business actions are opened up.

Building on a distinction between an *ostensive* and a *performative ontology*, the final part of the paper takes a performative standpoint, assuming that in practice, it should be possible, through the study of action in the making, to grasp the properties of business actions that are most relevant to the actors constructing them (Latour 1986, Czarniawska-

Joerges 1993). In the interaction between the actors and the researcher, narratives (and concepts) are constructed, being aware that "they are temporary and contingent on place and circumstance" (Czarniawska-Joerges 1993, p. 10). Conclusively, the paper raises a number of broader questions. *Why* should we bother at all to try to study action, i.e business action in the making, and furthermore, is it even possible to capture action in business studies? If we know what happens in the research process when various observations of business actions are to be translated into narratives and other texts, what types of stories are we actually telling in our business narratives?

Time

While humans can take different temporal *vantagepoints* (from the past, the present, or the future) and *viewing directions* (towards the past, the present, or the future) to describe, understand and predict their own behaviour, the variety seems to be more limited when business actions and behaviours are translated and reconstructed into researchers' narratives (see e.g. Pieters et al 1991).

Space

Is all action local? Does action determine locality? Is it possible to act at a distance? These were questions raised as we started to think about spatiality and action. It seemed to us that space was a dimension that had been relatively neglected in discussions about business narratives.

As many social observers has argued (e.g Weick, 1979; Giddens 1984) it seems that the notion of inter-action is central to action at large. At first, inter-action would seem to imply co-presence in both time and space. But this is not necessarily the case. To understand this, it is necessary to include the various mediators that are used in inter-action. Inter-action is generally supported by a host of intermediaries, e.g texts, tokens, and technical devices. Such intermediaries seem to allow action at a distance. This links the spatial dimension to the question of acting entities, for how should such intermediaries be conceptualised in our business narratives? Are they simply neutral carriers of the will of man? Although few would subscribe to such a view in principle, many business narratives display strong deterministic streak in their treatment of these intermediaries.

Narratives in Business Research

(work in progress: summary of empirical categorizations and analysis)

Implications and Suggestions

(work in progress: summary of main implications, including methodological suggestions)

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