Foreword: Thickness/realism – openness/usefulness – participation/relevance: reflections on the difference a narrative approach makes

Daniel Hjorth, The Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy, Copenhagen Business School

The distinctive quality of a narrative approach, when part of a qualitative research tradition, so I have suggested (Hjorth, 2008), is that it significantly increases language’s capacity to keep and carry the sense of occasion of the studied event (its ‘eventness’) to the reader. The purpose would be to allow for the intensity of – in this case – the entrepreneurial event to live in language, with the result that readers’ chance of experiencing (and not simply reading about) what took place in another time and place increases dramatically. ‘The task of understanding then depends not on the extraction of an abstract set of principles, and still less on the application of a theoretical model, but rather on an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual’ (Greenblatt and Gallagher, 2000: 7).

This foreword aspires not so much to anticipate the themes or arguments of the book as to endorse the approach with a somewhat widely gesturing signature. By this I mean to proceed as if Greenblatt and Gallagher’s note above gave me a gentle push in my back, suggesting that our capacity to make what we study knowable to a more general audience lies in the narrative’s power to connect the singular, the specific and the individual to the broader landscape of storied experiences and the productive resonance that emerge from this contact. I want to elaborate, as an inspired reader of this book, on three themes that I see as important challenges immanent to the art of practicing an edifying narrative approach: thickness/realism, openness/usefulness, and participation/relevance. The prefacing qualities of this maneuver lie in the fact that the arguments for the selection of these themes are indeed to be found through your reading of this timely and important contribution to business growth studies.
THICKNESS/REALISM

The distinction between the thin and the thick description seems to me still important for the difference that a narrative approach makes to the reader with ambitions to understand the text beyond the representational. Greenblatt, reporting on Geertz, phrases this in terms of the former (thin) being ‘merely describing the mute act’ while the latter (thick) is ‘giving the act its place in a network of framing intentions and cultural meanings.’ We recognize the circularity – the thick description is thick because it is written into a network of other small stories (petit récit, as Lyotard, 1984, puts this) in the context of which a more rich meaning is achieved. The Lyotard mention is significant here as I believe there is work of resistance, on the part of the writer, which is importantly linked to the networking capacity of the story. To the extent that the writer succeeds with placing the description into a network of intentions and cultural meanings (that is, in a network of other small stories), this is a matter of defending it against greedy theoretical models or abstract sets of principles, and such grand narratives that seek to further their explanatory power by colonizing a ‘new piece of land.’ To the extent that we learn something new from Mona Ericson’s study – and indeed, in several respects, we do – this is a result of her capacity to resist this tendency, which always offers itself up as an easy solution to all academic writers as they sense the loneliness of the one holding in her hand a set of small, loosely connected, flowing stories in a world of giant, solid, and stable theories. On the level of the analytical strategy, we learn from this book the prize that results from winning such multiple small battles: new and deeper meaning.

‘Thickness is not in the object; it is in the narrative surroundings, the add-ons, the nested frames’ (Greenblatt, 2000: 25). Our ‘raw’ stories, recorded in the field, will thus always be given sense and meaning in the particular style that is the result of the entwining of the writer’s peculiar way of driving the pen, and the research field’s cultured ways of understanding its reality. So, for instance, a description such as: ‘The banker had five children,’ is likely to be implicative of an opportunity (to finance a toy store), in the network of entrepreneurship research’s way of understanding its reality. An anthropologist, however, may find this description to be full of complexities related to ‘ways of living’ that primarily do not suggest the presence of an economic opportunity. Neither of the two senses is the true one. Statistical certainty would not help one try to make sense of or discriminate (on the basis of accuracy) between the two descriptions. Both, instead, are part of the richness and complexity of the acted documents that are social life.

One’s capacity as a writer to keep the sense of event in the studied piece of life alive depends to a large extent on whether one is acquainted ‘with the imaginative universe within which their [those that are studied] acts are signs’
(Geertz, 1973: 11). Here, again, we are reassured by Ericson’s style that she is acquainted with the imaginative universe within which the locals’ acts that she has studied are signs. This does not provide her with the urge or possibility to close her stories, to finalize them, to determine what they are essentially about. Instead, the richness of experiences, narrated and contextualized, invites the reader as writer – as someone made competent (by the style of the text) to go on writing these stories into their own imaginative universes, telling others those stories that were not delivered by (in this case) Ericson’s pen. This generosity towards the reader is a distinct quality of the text Barthes called ‘writerly’ (Barthes, 1990); the text that foregrounds its meaning-making progresses via several voices, and does not shy from heterogeneity of sense. Ericson emphasizes, with the help of O’Connor, that idea that stories have a ‘life far beyond the single occasion of its telling,’ as she, towards the end of the book, reflects upon a narrative dynamic conceptualization of business growth.

We thus learn that thickness is a matter of realism. Not scientific-realism (boiling down to the view that science generates knowledge about phenomena that are theory independent), but realism that we find in William James’ pragmatism as well as in contemporary post-structuralism, proceeding from the conclusions that participation precedes recognition, and relation precedes position (Massumi, 2002). It is this already relationally engaged position that a narrative approach embraces and explores in its thicker descriptions. The result is that research is speaking to us in a realistic voice.

**OPENNESS/USEFULNESS**

This is also where research, speaking in this voice, becomes relevant and useful. Usefulness, I will suggest here, is secured by the style we have identified above as producing the writerly text, which foregrounds its meaning-making, is multivoiced and proceeds along the realism of heterogeneous sense. Here is where openness – and the generosity toward and faith in the reader’s own lived experience of making sense that this openness addresses – is related to usefulness. The narrative approach is not about ‘staying in language,’ for there is no way not to stay in language (which is not to deny nature or emotions – we never arrive at nature, however, except with culture as a necessary companion; Latour, 1993; 1999). Usefulness is based on the narrative approach’s insistence on the knowledge-creation capacity of everyday life. ‘All bare facts,’ Massumi (2002: 214) reminds us, ‘are born factoid.’ The question is not whether it is real or constructed, says Latour (1999), but whether it is constructed well enough, according to the practices of science, to pass as fact. The question is not about the status of language. The question is
to what extent the academic study asks us to join that particular practice of making knowledge over which it has established control historically, or whether it seeks to remain – as long as possible – in the realm of storied knowing. The narrative approach we are acquainted with in the book you have started to read is of the kind where the precision of narrative wit is held as dear to the knowledge-thirsting, curious mind, as ever the abstract-aspiring fact-making of scientific rationality.

Now, again, it is not a matter of constructing a dichotomy and proceeding as if correctness would be bestowed upon those keeping to one side of the construct. Indeed, it is the work of scholarly endeavors – call this more precisely a quest – to strive toward the well-constructed fact. The fact is defendable and meaningful, beautiful and workable. A narrative approach, however, is distinctly about what Greenblatt (2000: 31) describes as ‘making the literary and the non-literary seem to be each other’s thick description,’ by which I here mean: make the narrative and the scientific seem like each other’s thick description.

You may object by saying this means a narrative approach loses its uniqueness. Admittedly, it characterizes qualitative research more generally, this ‘dialogue’ between the scientific (abstract principle, theoretical model) and the empirical data (Morgan, 1983). We find it as an ideal in hermeneutically oriented approaches, and Gadamer speaks about the fusion of horizons (horizon being the historically derived situatedness from which understanding and interpretation takes place) so that we come to understand the other and reach an agreement. However, it is precisely the problem of the other that was underestimated in hermeneutics and which emerged in its fuller politico-ethical complexity with Levinas (1987) and postcolonial theory (e.g. Bhabha, 1990).

Anthropology, which inspired research on culture as it bloomed within management and organization studies in the early 1980s (Smircich, 1983) intensified our awareness of this problem as it illustrated the challenges. The interest in the ‘native’s’ phrasing of his reality (the emic view, as anthropological literature calls this) was as much a colonial gaze in spite of its well-meaning intentions. ‘Each other’s thick description’ is therefore a more demanding task than it may first seem. A genuine dialogue, as Bakhtin (1981) has shown in the case of Dostoevsky’s novels, requires a polyphony that results from a writer who embraces what we have called above the heterogeneity of sense. Dostoevsky’s literature is in this sense good literature as it makes (in Greenblatt’s words) the literary and the nonliterary seem to be each other’s thick description.

In perspective of this discussion, I would say that the keyword in Ericson’s narrative approach is participatory, which is the aim and value that makes it useful as well as relevant.
PARTICIPATION/RELEVANCE

When emphasizing the importance of participation, I mean to draw attention to the continuity of experience – from Latin *experientia*, meaning ‘the act of trying.’ Continuity is achieved by how actuality, as intensity, as registering potential (the virtual) binds our world together. The glue, Massumi (2002: 220) suggests, is affect (which is not emotion, but rather intensity, or capacity to act). Participation is always a matter of response. The time spent in the field is an investment in actuality, in the becoming of practices you study. Affect binds this situation to the narration of it, and the subsequent addressing of people and processes that is part of how you feed back your research. The logic is almost the opposite of classical idea(1)s of objectivity, where (artificial) detachment was seen as the basis for correct knowledge coming out at the end of the research process. From the perspective of a narrative approach, precision as well as relevance is instead made possible by the continuity that affect brings. It is not a matter of losing oneself to the local, contextual, singular, specific, or individual. Again, it is not about the emotional. A narrative approach has better chances of being relevant, precise and meaningful to the extent that it registers and explores how bodies’ capacities to act increases and decreases. This is how a narrative approach can be participative; by working with affect (and so, make room for potential).

When I once sketched out a way (method) to follow as a poststructuralist analyst (Hjorth, 2003), I suggested that genesis – repetition – participation provided workable guidance. Participation – to take part – was also there a gesture towards the shared experience. That is, the scholar that finds engaging with empirical studies necessary because of her interest with everyday practices needs also to aspire to participation in shaping those practices, or, more often, shaping how those practices are imagined. Participation, of some kind, is one way of testing the relevance of your thick descriptions. It is a way of checking how ‘writerly’ your knowledge of the local field of practices is, how useful it can become in the unfolding into networks of intensions and cultural meanings that practitioners ‘do’ to it. It is, as Ericson correctly points out, a matter of dialogue.

Relevance, however, is in no way exhausted by usefulness. The small story’s power to affect the other is immensely important for the other’s capacity to become affected. What is brushed off one day as useless, can the next day be the key to one’s receptivity towards the unexpected, the unpredicted, to the registering of potential – the world’s becoming. A story that knows how to generate affect can be as participative as the one that is immediately embraced as useful. A ‘scar’ of intensity – the duration of the image’s effect, as Massumi (2002) defines this – left on the surface of an organizational culture will often have tactical impacts on the social. Like de Certeau’s (1984) ‘transformative
insinuation’ (as Ahearne described de Certeau’s concept of tactics, 1995: 163), it affects the movement so that a surprising effect is achieved. This is one important argument for a narrative approach – that something remains for the writing. That writing is a process of becoming relevant of the researcher, and this relevance is a matter of working with affect (intensities, capacities to act; Deleuze, 1995) as binding experiences – ‘ours and theirs’ – together.

REFERENCES


