

THE NARRATIVE COLLAGE AS RESEARCH METHOD

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ONCE UPON A TIME...

...there was a teacher and a student. The teacher was me some ten years ago and the student was one of many attending my class in basic Organization Theory. I held a mid term exam consisting of several, more or less, structured test-like questions and one open question. I don't remember the topic, but perhaps it was about motivation or maybe leadership styles? Anyway, among the exams I collected from the students there was one containing not only the standard answers but also a funny short poem about a boss motivating his employees. I recall that the student also wrote an apology, "Sorry for this little silly poem, but I thought it would be nice." Actually, it was rather nice as well as unusual; students rarely write something other than quite standard answers, especially at an exam.

The poem did something more than just brighten my day (what teacher likes checking exams? I have yet to meet that person). It was really funny and to the point, somehow, although, of course, it could not be included in my final credit for the exam. It said something that regular answers utterly missed. I kept thinking about it and one day I decided to see what happens if I explicitly ask students to write poems about a topic related to their education, namely about management. They did. I read them, and realized that they said many quite fascinating things that were... perfectly beside the topic.

I then wrote a text (Kostera, 1997) about poetic definitions of management, quoting extensively the poems, and have been using this way of gathering insights ever since, once in a while, when I want to learn about things that are beside the topic but nonetheless worth exploring. These things concern the creative aspects of the cultural context of organizing. I call the method the narrative collage and this text is about its methodological roots, uses and some possible results.

Not everything can be expressed as matter-of-fact discourse, especially things one cannot really put one's finger on, or things that do not exist yet. Some of them are central to human experience, such as falling in love or admiring the full moon rising over the sea. If we want to explore this kind of experience, we need means and methods that are suited to communicate it. The *narrative collage* is one such method.

This text is about the narrative collage. First, I talk about the narrative turn in organization studies and consider to the following questions: Why are stories important for interaction and knowledge? What can social scientists learn from storytelling traditions? What are the different uses of stories in the study of organizations?

Further, I focus on the uses of one specific type of story in organizational research: fictive stories. There are several ways in which fiction can be used in social studies and the narrative collage is presented as a method particularly well suited for studies where imagination plays a central role. The idea of performative definitions, or linguistic statements that define the state of things (Austin, 1973/ 1993), is described as

an epistemological ground for the application of such stories. I also present some examples of narrative collage from my own work.

The paper ends with a methodological section, where the narrative collage is portrayed among other similar research methods: ethnography and Action Research. Finally, I propose a model of the process of collecting short stories for research purposes as well as in a practice setting.

STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATION STUDIES

The narrative approach has not been high on the lists in organization studies for many years but is now once again gaining recognition (for overview, see Czarniawska, 1995; 1997 and 2004). It is a fortunate development, considering that stories are a natural mode of organizing experience, the way in which we perceive the world, as well as the traditional form of human knowledge (Bruner, 1991). Narrative is the most common form of social interaction, as Alasdair MacIntyre (1981/1997) upholds, and it is a way of making sense of the world around us (Weick, 1995; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2001). Stories can be told or written. Traditional cultures are storytelling cultures in the literal sense: people tell each other stories. At certain occasions the stories gain a special role, such as on a child's bedtime or while sitting around the campfire. According to Aristotle, stories make it possible for us to share our world. We actively participate in the creation of culture by listening to stories and telling them – and we learn about culture through stories. Modern societies often write their stories in addition to telling them, and then they acquire a special status of literature or social science. Oral or printed on paper – they are important in all cultures. I agree with Barbara Czarniawska (2000: p. 2) who asserts that a "student of social life, no matter which domain, needs to become interested in narrative as a form of knowledge, a form of social life, and a form of communication."

The first and most obvious way that academic authors can use narratives is to learn how to write with an inclusion of plots (Czarniawska, 1999). The plot, which is a strategy of transition from one state to another, helps to establish connections and associations between phenomena and between actors. A plot does not need to claim cause-effect relationships but helps to show what actions have been taken by which actors and what the consequences were. It is a traditional way of presenting field material in organization studies, especially in case studies, perhaps the most well known teaching tool of management and organization theory (Czarniawska and Guillet de Monthoux, 1994).

Umberto Eco (1997/ 2000) names the following further reasons for including stories in academic writing: to enhance discourse, to illustrate theses, and to anchor scientific reflections in human experience. All those reasons are applicable for organization studies.

Some organizations are definitely in the business of storytelling, such as Disney or Lucas Arts, and their interest in stories is fully understandable for most people. But the use of stories is not limited to just these organizations. In fact, narratives can be applied to many different ends by organization theorists and practitioners. Barbara Czarniawska recognizes the following uses of the narrative approach in field research:

- Watch how the stories are being made.

- Collect the stories.
- Interpret the stories (what do they say?)
- Analyze the stories (how do they say it?)
- Deconstruct the stories (unmake them).
- Put together your own story.
- Set it against / together with other stories (Czarniawska, 1999, p. 22).

	Practice	Between Practice and Theory	Theory
Uses of stories by researchers of organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observation of how the stories are being made • Collection of field-stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of stories • Story-analysis • Deconstruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of own story • Putting the story the context of other stories
Uses of stories by organizational practitioners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking part in story-creation for internal use • Taking part in story-creation for stories for external use • Listening to stories (collection) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making sense of stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making sense of the world through stories • Learning through stories

Tab. 1. Uses of stories by researchers and practitioners of organizations.

The first two uses of stories happen out in the field, while the researcher is collecting material on organizational practices. When interviewees tell stories, the researcher listens and records them as empirical data.. The last two are related to the process of theorizing. The researcher writes stories, while organizing the field material or making sense of studied phenomena. The three middle ones are located in between practice and theory. They are concerned with interpretation and translation. Here the task of the researcher is to put stories in relation to other knowledge she or he possesses and see how they work or what they "do" to the readers and listeners.

Of course, students of organizations are not the only ones interested in stories. Also, practitioners deal with stories in their everyday life. Yiannis Gabriel (2000) shows how stories are a natural part of organizational everyday life. Organizations are full of "narratives with simple but resonant plots and characters, involving narrative skill, entailing risk, and aiming to entertain, persuade, and win over" (p. 22). Narratives are the stuff of everyday conversations between the organizational actors in official as well as unofficial situations. Stories also are told to outsiders: to the media, customers, and researchers. A story-less organization would be a dead one. And, as social constructivists like to point out, these do not exist (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992).

To summarize, stories are a natural and plentiful phenomenon, to be found in organization theory as well as practice. Researchers may find it useful to look for such existing stories.

METHODS OF COLLECTING FICTIVE STORIES

Both researchers and practitioners collect stories in organizations. Researchers often do this quite methodically and intentionally, while practitioners “just do it” – listen to and remember those stories that are relevant for them or perhaps just interesting. Both groups may strive for the getting hold of true and existing narratives, or they may wish people to tell them invented stories. There are three common creative uses of stories, of which the first two: making sense of stories and re-reading of stories are employed mainly by researchers, and the third: the narrative collage, can be used by researchers and practitioners alike.

	Making sense of stories	Re-reading of stories	Narrative collage
Initiators	Researchers	Researchers	Researchers and Practitioners
Starting point: what the initiator provides the respondents with	Vague story	Fiction (novel, novella, fable, etc.)	Staring sentence or topic
Respondents	Organizational actors	Organizational actors	Organizational actors and other researchers
Method: what the respondents do	Interpret initial story by filling in	Interpret fictive story by application to organizational context	Invent story
End result	Explanation from cultural context	Explanation from cultural context, and/or description of context and tradition	Collection of fictive stories – collage

Tab. 2. Creative uses of stories in organizational contexts.

Firstly, informants can be asked to construct stories in order to make sense of some more or less ambiguous ideas. They make use of their knowledge and expertise to bridge the gaps and to link vaguely sketched fragments of plot. Barbara Czarniawska and Marta Calás (1998) used this method to study cultural differences in gender construction. The study they carried out was designed around a set of short stories featuring a female heroine. The stories were only very roughly sketched and no explanations were given as to the rather puzzling occurrences that the readers were presented with. The plots were similar: a female heroine was subjected to inexplicable and unfair treatment. The settings differed, but were not explained. The stories were handed out to students of social sciences in six different countries with the request to fill in the blanks and thus complete the story. Many respondents conceived of the stories

as cases of gender discrimination and constructed fitting plots. However, numerous students explained what was happening by referring to a far away setting – some strange other culture which was, of course, different from their home culture.

Secondly, stories that are already invented may be read and analyzed from an organizational point of view. The stories can be either taken from literature or mass media. The book, *Good Novels, Better Management*, edited by Barbara Czarniawska and Pierre Guillet de Monthoux (1994), is an example of this use of the narrative method. Each of the chapters describes one culture, focusing on a well known literary work to portray the cultural context of organizing. The chapters are written as book reviews or essays in literary criticism, and so are an example of creative interpretation of texts, rather than purely analytical.

Thirdly, stories can also be made up. In my own research I often use fictive narrative to explore organizing and organizations. I then ask actors in the field for a creative construction of stories. This is what I call narrative collage: a method that consciously goes beyond realist storytelling. Its purpose is to play with ideas and discover the cultural context and the actors' creativity. It is aimed at encouraging the respondents to invent stories about a given topic or beginning with a specified starting line. The respondents choose the genre themselves and construct the plot as they wish. The researcher acts as a collector and editor of stories. Their role is not so much to analyze the material, as to see what whole can be made up of the stories and what it says about the cultural context of organizing. The goal is to enter the domain of the social imagination. This domain is a kind of reality as well, albeit of a potential character, providing people with a capability of creative action.

PERFORMATIVES OF IMAGINATION

The idea underlying story-collection and in particular, narrative collage as its epistemological ground, is based on Austin's (1973/1993) notion of performative definitions. According to Austin, performatives are statements that define the state of things. One well known example is the act of marriage. The priest or the civil servant declares two people married and so they become legally a married couple. Following Austin, Bruno Latour (1986) has proposed two types of definitions of society: the ostensive and the performative. The ostensive definition is one that points out social phenomena and objectively describes their characteristics. By contrast, the performative definition is authored by the actors themselves, from the inside, in order to enable action. A researcher can either endeavor to coin ostensive definitions "objectively" from the outside of the studied phenomena, or to collect performative definitions from the inside, asking the social actors to provide him or her with them. On the basis of these insider definitions the researcher may aim at formulating his or her own performative definition.

Asking people to make up stories is also a way of gathering performatives, even though these performatives do not necessarily pertain to existing practices and actions. Fictive stories are located in the domain of the possible, the potential and not yet realized. They can turn out to be useful in processes of change, both in order to understand new phenomena and to put new ideas into action. But they also may become forgotten and obsolete. There is no direct link between the "imagined performatives" and social action, although they may provide creative solutions in the future.

The role of the researcher collecting fictive stories is similar to that of an editor who actively looks for interesting material and tries to also express herself through that material. The point of the process is to approach the subjective sphere – closer to feelings and imagination than to “solid facts.” The researcher initiates them. Without the initiative they would probably not have happened in the form they do. But it is more like initiating a conversation than launching a change process. The researcher cannot decide beforehand whether the stories will or will not be used for creating change in the socially constructed real world.

EXAMPLES OF USE OF NARRATIVES COLLAGE

I have repeatedly used narrative collage in my research into ideas of organization. At one instance, I asked students to write poems about management (Kostera, 1997). The poems enabled me to reflect on whether or not management education provides students with inspiration for organizing. The following is an example that shows how the students saw their education and its role in gaining knowledge about management. It uses subtle irony but also expresses warm feelings of the author towards his or her studies, and a trace of hope:

Recipe

Take:

half a glass of sociology

2 glasses of psychology

one half kilo of statistics

a spoon of economics

optionally dried fruit

a pinch of fiction (imagination)

Shake

Keep in a cool, dry place a certain time...

P.S. Should be effective

(Anonymous)

I have concluded my study with writing my own poem in response and reflecting on the different poetic energies present in the material, such as irony, hope, and laughter. I affirmed that:

[t]he authors of the poems have [...] defined reality critically, as something to be changed and reconstructed more on their own terms. The definitions are creating empty spaces, inventing and delivering ambiguity into their context. They have power. (Kostera, 1997, p. 351).

For another study, I have collected stories about control from various students of management (Kostera, 2002). My intention was to explore the cultural underpinning of

the word, so often used in management education and so rarely reflected upon. The stories were dark, often sinister, and their theme was rarely related to the rational and optimistic case studies to be found in management textbooks. The following is a typical example, a short story about control (*kontrola* in Polish), authored by an evening program student in management, also working as a middle level manager:

As I woke up at seven in the morning, I saw that it was still night outside. Even though I dislike getting up when it's dark, I felt happy. At least, I was free! Yesterday I broke up with my boyfriend. I've had enough of him. He was checking on me [kontrolowac mnie] all the time. Incessantly, he was asking me: "what are you doing? Where are you going? With whom?" I got up and went to the bathroom. "What are you doing there such a long time?" — my mother asked, as usual. I threw a scrutinizing [kontrolne] look into the mirror, and went out. I left home late, as usual. At the bus a rather unpleasant surprise awaited me. The routinely checking [kontrola] of tickets. The ticket inspector was unyielding. At school it turned out that we had a test assignment [praca kontrolna] in mathematics. Even though my pal assured me that everything was under control [pod kontrola], the assignment didn't go too well. I returned home in a bad mood. It turned out that during my absence my mother had checked [skontrolowala] the order in my room. In a gloomy mood I went to the dentist for a checkup [wizyta kontrolna]. As I was sitting by my desk in the evening, I heard my mother's voice: "What are you doing there that it's so quiet?" (Anonymous)

The protagonist of the story was a high school student, much younger than the physical author. The instances of control in her life defined the boundaries of her rather restricted freedom. Everyone was checking on her and she had problems in finding a space free from this kind of control. Other authors used tickets inspectors as symbols of control, as well as police, teachers and officials, interfering with the private lives of the protagonists and often abusing their power. The main heroes and heroines tended to be passive and helpless in the face of this interference. The general aura of the stories I have collected was that of powerlessness, the vulnerability of the individual vis a vis some omnipotent and omniscient authority. In my essay I tried to point to the cultural embeddedness of ideas such as control and to the need of acknowledging the context in management discourse.

My most recent use of the method was connected with a quest I undertook into gaining some insight into self-actualization in organizations (Kostera, 2005). I asked some colleagues, organization researchers, as well as students, to write stories that began with a given first opening phrase. I did four rounds of story collection, each with another opening line. The stories were handed to me either personally or via email. The first round of stories began with the following phrase: *Once upon a time a monk knocked on a big front door of a corporate HQ.* I will quote two examples of different stories from the first round. One was authored by a Master level student, and its tone was definitely pro-managerial, which was rather uncommon, and its plot was quite simple.

Once upon a time a monk knocked on a big front door of a corporate HQ of a tobacco company. He wanted to talk with people and persuade them not to produce cigarettes because that's hurtful for humanity. He saw the people working in that big corporation. They were young, beautiful, well dressed and happy. In the beginning he was surprised and he didn't know how the life of those people looks like. He spent several weeks in the company, he got to like the people and their way of life. Eventually he decided that his life up till now has been gray and uninteresting. So he shed his habit of monk and joined the ranks of the people of success, forgetting what he had come here for. (Anonymous)

The second story is written by a professor in organization psychology. Its plot is more complex and there is a twist by the end that makes the whole narrative rather ironic.

Once upon a time a monk knocked on a big front door of a corporate HQ . . .

"Gizajob" he said.

"A job?" they answered, "you, a man of the cloister? But why? Why do you come here? Why choose the marketplace when you could have the peace of the contemplative life?"

"Ah", he replied, "that requires some explanation. I'm not a Buddhist, I'm a Christian monk. So reincarnation is not an option; this one life is all that we've got. If I'm to purify my soul and merit eternal bliss in heaven, where else am I to do so but out here, in the material world? And what best represents the world than the business corporation?"

"It's funny you should say that", they replied. Our managing director has turned to spirituality. He's been reading about relationship marketing, and feels that the same should apply to selling: only through the development of a spiritual relationship with the customer, and the provision of ethically correct goods and services, can we maximize our profits and experience the ultimate good of this material world." "Perhaps you've been right all along" they continued," and there is merit in goodness and contemplation. In any event, be gone; there is nothing for you here in this corporation."

And the moral of the story is that they were, of course, wrong: for you mustn't bite the fan that heeds you. (A.D. Jankowicz)

After I have collected the first batch of stories, I put them into different subgroups by plot. I differentiated the stories according to whether the spiritual space, symbolized by the monk, and the organizational space, represented by the corporation met or failed to do so and what the consequences of that meeting were. In most stories the spaces clash or fail to meet. Only few show that an encounter is possible and they also reveal the reasons for it: representatives of the different spaces must be able to see each other and they have to be able to move spatially.

My second round of story collection was aimed at exploration of what would happen to the plots if the initial positions of the actors were reversed. I asked my correspondents to write stories beginning with: *The CEO knocked on the door of the monastery*. As a result I received stories primarily aimed at an explanation of what was the CEO's business, to stand in front of the gates of the monastery. The following story is an example of the second batch narratives, where the plot is distinctly focused on the presence of the CEO in these unusual circumstances.

The CEO knocked on the door of the monastery and waited some minutes then she knocked again. The door was big and brown nearly black with a large handle. The CEO, called Jane, was thinking about the size of the key that fit into the keyhole when the door slowly opened. There stood a man in a habit with a part of his face hidden in a hood. He looked at Jane and said:

- Yes, what can I help you with?

Jane felt that this idea that her husband should go to a monastery was a crazy move. She looked down and said:

- My name is Jane Blair and I'm searching for my husband. I got some information that he could be here.

- Oh, said the monk and looked at Jane, and why hide here?

- His did not, like directly hide from me, Jane tried to explain, he was so worked up that he just took the car and drove away. He has hidden from his work.

- I see, I see, said the monk with a deep voice. His hood fell down on his shoulders.

Jane looked at his face. He had brown eyes, a big nose and a fine mouth.

Jane Blair was 29 and worked with a successful company. She's recently been promoted to CEO of the company. And she really liked the job. The disadvantage was that it took a lot of time and she had not been home much lately.

Her husband, Tony Blair, was a well known middle-aged politician. At first he was lucky for her job but when she got promoted to CEO he had acted more and more quite and surly. But that was perhaps due to his own work, what did Jane know? Three days ago he came home and said:

- I need some time for my self to rest and think of my life and our life. Then he drove away.

Jane told the monk about this and explained:

- There I stood. He needed to think. That's understandable. But how much time does he need for that? I'm worried. It's been ten days now. And he's still missing. I called his secretary and asked if she knew where he was. She didn't. So I am now making the rounds of monasteries. That's all.

The monk looked at her. His eyes grew large. He tried to compose himself. But he failed. He literally exploded with laughter. He laughed and laughed until his stomach ached. God, this is just too funny. Tony Blair in a monastery looking for peace! (Annette Frisk)

The name was probably just a coincidence, although the author did not reveal it for certain. The reader can, however, suspect, that it was indeed so. The CEO was the worried wife of someone called Tony Blair, and she was looking for a missing husband who suddenly had decided to go new age in order to escape from the everyday stress. But the monk, apart from being a religious person, was also human. He could not help laughing when he heard about a Tony Blair going to a monastery. In the batch of stories, apart from the main motive which was explaining what the CEO was doing at the monastery, the authors concentrated again on the possibility of meeting between the spiritual and organizational domains. Quite often the meeting did not take place or, if it did, it was a way of escaping reality, a tale of dislocation or clash. Some authors told stories of transformation and sharing. These tales emphasized the protagonists' desire to encounter the Other, and value of openness.

The third and fourth rounds of story collection were aimed at what I identified as portals between the organizational and spiritual spaces: freedom and silence. The authors provided me with narratives which I again classified according to plot. This is a rather typical example.

In the big conference room all the assembled employees fell silent and stared in disbelief on the TV screen. Today, after a pause of 16 years the Polish national team was winning a match in the world championships. After 90 minutes of hard struggle the judge finally pointed at the middle of the field to announce the end of the match. In the meantime, a part of the employees, until now standing in silence, exploded with joy. Colleagues embraced each other, shouting: "We are the best!" Somebody in the first row rose, stood at attention and with a loud, solemn voice began to

sing "Yet has Poland not perished..." Soon the words of the anthem resounded in the whole room. Unexpectedly after a few moments the CEO ran into the room with a smile on his face. Yes, the same "generous man" who allowed everyone to watch the match – the first match of the Polish national team at the World Championship in 16 years. Well, I'm really not surprised that he'd allowed us, a fan like him is hard to find, and besides, the idea to do it was dropped by Leszek Miller who, too, allowed his co-workers to watch the match.

Nonetheless, the CEO now stood, watching the cheerful employees, waited until all calm down and said: "Well, now we have to do the scheduled job." (Anonymous)

The stories about silence often related some extraordinary event, like the one quoted above. The employees fell silent because they were facing something strange and unexpected. In most stories they then returned to life as usual, as if nothing had happened at all. In some narratives the disturbing event was minor, in others – quite important. There were also tales of transformation, revolution and sudden change. In one story silence was portrayed as an everyday practice, a way of coming in touch with the spiritual domain. The employees used to meditate together and the organization was built in respect of both individuality and collectivity.

The stories about freedom were usually skeptical or negative towards the initial declaration, as in the following:

"You are free" – said the director.

You are free? I am free? What kind of statement is that?! Of course I am free. Does she think she's God or something? Or is she a corporal? Where does one get such manners? I heard that she became a director very fast. And I heard that she quickly developed these manners. Maybe she had a boss like that herself. A boss who liked to say: "you are free."

"Something else? You are free."

If she says any more I will have an epileptic fit. Instead, I raise a smile that hurts my face.

He left. He did not slam the door. She really was a nice person. Maybe not particularly warm, but the distance between them was okay with him, as with everybody else. You could clearly see who the boss was, and she did that with class. Well, except for the pronunciations of freedom, that really sucked. But she was respected so nobody objected. All the employees from her own department had to suffer this, even if sometimes, very rarely indeed, somebody whispered something under his or her breath, leaving the office with a smile on the face and not slamming the door.

He entered his office and asked that new assistant to come over. It was important to pass on the new amendments to the next year's plan to him as fast as possible. The young assistant was really young, still a bit green, but already effective. A bit lost in the social relations. "But even I am not yet an expert in all these games and this politics", he thought. The young assistant took notes, asked a few questions, came with two ideas. One was good, in need of some work, but realistic. The other was a bit from outer space. "Yes, this was going to be a good employee," he reflected, "we're a good department, quite task orientated. A bit stressed out perhaps."

"You are free." he said.

The young assistant did not smile. He gaped.

"...you are free, man. I mean, you really are. Really free, a free human being. You don't have to take any shit, you know?" I added quickly, trying to control the color of my face. (Agata Granowska)

The protagonist was declared free by his boss and this was clearly a kind of an insult, but when he himself repeated the slogan to a subordinate, he realized his mistake and turned the phrase on its head, to become a real word of empowerment. But it was not clear whether it would make any real difference in the end. The declaration of freedom was plotted in similar ways by most authors: as something suspect, disappointment, a shift to another kind of oppression. Sometimes the tone was more positive and in several stories it meant a beginning of a new deal, or simply the announcement of the beginning of free time.

Finally, I wrote my own story that was intended as a response to all the collected stories. It was not a conclusion, summary or simple repetition but a story of what I have learned from all the collected narratives about the links between spirituality and organizing. It linked the openings together in one narrative and made use of all the means I discovered in the collected stories of making the spiritual and organizational domains meet.

The CEO in my story has followed the directions offered by the protagonists in the stories I have collected from other authors: she sees the monk, listens to him, and she literally moves out of the corporate structure with him. They both move spatially, she lets him ride in her car. Afterwards, she feels compelled to move again and gives in to the desire. She moves in cyberspace: looking for traces of the monk, and in physical space: visiting a monastery herself. Then she unexpectedly meets some young people with whom she again moves in space and to whom she listens. She has learned quite a lot during all these journeys and she feels like sharing her insight and the power with others. She uses the portal of silence to let her words be heard. Her employees listen and seem to understand. Then she pronounces them free. And yet nobody is dismissed, fired or excluded. Quite the opposite: what she did was a way of inviting people to co-create a new venture together with her. (Kostera, 2005, p. 172)

Through the narrative quest I have learned much about imagined encounters between the spiritual and the organizational domains. I have learned how difficult it is, but also how it can be made possible by seeing, listening and opening one's mind in silence. The ensuing creativity can be used for constructive organizational actions. It is rarely observable in practice but it happens sometimes: in organizations which are not managed in too authoritarian a way, without managerialist aspirations, and most likely, in organizations where management is replaced by entrepreneurial modes of control. Entrepreneurship is about questioning old institutions, it is paradoxical: it is both anarchic and organizing, both a revolution and an evolution, it is a vision and action, dependent and independent, based on both experience and reflection (Johannisson, 2005).

NARRATIVE COLLAGE AND OTHER NARRATIVE METHODS

In summary, the narrative collage is a qualitative method best suited to study the domain of the imagined. It is aimed at exploring the subjective but not the individual. The point with composing a collage out of the collected stories is to find a collective level in the invention. It is a kind of inter-subjective reality, although the stories are not realist.

IMAGINE ORGANIZING

Imagination plays an important role in organizations and our ideas about organizing (Morgan, 1993). Creative solutions arrive when imagination is actively used by key organizational actors. Innovative ideas happen when people actively develop their imagination¹. Also, in everyday sense-making within organizations imagination plays an important role (Weick, 1995). To fully understand processes of organizing, we need to know more about such areas as study of symbols and archetypes, organizational legends, as well as dramatic scenarios in which lies embedded the innovative potential of the organization (Hatch, Kostera and Kozminski, 2005). In particular, imagination is important for creative organizational activities, such as entrepreneurship – a lifestyle, a playful and creative approach to life and work. Entrepreneurship is about breaking old patterns in order to test the borders of the possible, explore new grounds and perhaps establish new institutions (Johannisson, 2005; Hjorth, Johannisson and Steyaert, 2003). It is impossible without imagination.

Of course, there is more to social life than just imagination. In other areas other narrative methods of study are better suited. I will now try to make a brief comparison of fairly related methods and their possible applications.

NARRATIVE COLLAGE COMPARED WITH OTHER QUALITATIVE METHODS

The table below presents the narrative collage as a research method compared with two other qualitative methods where stories play a crucial role: ethnography and Action Research.

Research method	Aim of study	Role of researcher	Character of interaction	Result of study
Ethnography	Understanding	Observer	Reflexivity	Story (realistic)
Action research	Change/ learning	Initiative taker - consultant	Experimental learning	Creative change
Narrative collage	Narrative movement and understanding	Initiative taker - main author	Narrative experiment	Story (fictive)

Table 4. Characteristics of the narrative collage as a research method.

Based on: Johannisson (2005), Kostera (2005), Chrostowski (2005).

A method also using stories, although of the realist kind, is ethnography. It is often based on stories gathered in the field and itself takes the form of a story. Ethnographic narratives are concerned with social practice and the processes of social construction of reality. Ethnography may occasionally touch the sphere of the imagined and thus not yet constructed but it is of rather limited use in this area. For example, I once wanted to learn about ideas of the future of Polish managers and asked my interviewees to tell me about their visions. The managers told me instead, of the past, sometimes as distant as the 50s. None of them wanted to talk about any future visions, even though a few talked about the present. I then chose to adapt the theme of my study to the interviewees' preferences and did an ethnography about the history of

¹ More about imagination and innovation and their role in organizations in: Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 1998.

management in Poland. Had I wanted to pursue my initial interest though, I would have been able to gain from the narrative collage method. The future cannot be narrated because it has not happened yet. In order to talk about things that do not yet exist, people need a medium and a language suited to imaginary domains. I could have asked my respondents to invent a futuristic story about their enterprise set, for example, in the 2020s. Then I could have produced my own management-science-fiction novella based on these stories. It would then give a picture of things that cannot be realistically described but that existed in the managers' (and my own) minds as possible sources of creative ideas.

There are other important differences between the ethnography and the narrative collage. The ethnographer is traditionally an inductive researcher who tries not to interfere with the studied field and to have as few of their own ideas as possible. As I have pointed out above, the author of the narrative collage does indeed have ideas: she or he is the initiative taking editor, engaging others in a conversation and actively composing a collage out of their responses. He or she should, however, try not to dominate the picture and not to "force" the assembled stories in some preconceived mould. The flow of the narratives should be followed as much as possible. To make a good collage, it is important to react to the twists of the plots, and not just come with own inspirations.

The final shape of the narrative collage depends on its author. In this, the role of the researcher is similar to the role of an artist who creates a visual collage. The leading author expresses themselves through the completed work, which is not an entirely "original", because it is made up of the works of others. All authors co-create the collage.

Each person would compose the collage somewhat differently. Other elements become emphasized, others end up as background, other common themes are found etc. Each study of this kind is unique, just as each visual arts event is unique. This kind of uniqueness is a result of imagination, as well as it inspires further imagining.

The third method I have chosen to briefly introduce for the sake of comparison, Action Research, is a much more hands-on method, bordering on consulting or even crossing the line (Chrostowski, 2005). Stories are an important part of the Action Researcher's work as well, especially case studies, which are presented to the organization where change is to be introduced, in order to be used as a source for learning and inspiration. The Action Researcher often finds him- or herself collecting stories in the organization. These stories are then used in order to communicate with people about the change process. The entire learning process can be conceived of as based on stories and storytelling (Chrostowski, 2005).

Ethnography is the most classical research method among the three listed in the table. The aim of ethnography is to gain understanding. In this it is similar to narrative collage. Both methods make it possible to map and explore cultural contexts and networks of meaning. However, whereas the ethnographer should play a reflexive role in the research process, the editor of the narrative collage is an initiative taker. There are less traditional types of ethnography where the researcher is much more active (see e.g. Van Maanen, 1995), the most extreme example being self-ethnography (Alvesson, 2003) where ethnographers studies themselves in the field. Yet the classical ideal of ethnography defines the role of the researcher as an outsider, a professional stranger, as in the title of a well known book by Michael Agar (1996). The editor of the narrative

collage should definitely be more of an insider, the main author of the collage. The Action Researcher is an insider too, but he or she deals primarily with practices, and with talk only when it is useful for learning. He or she is a consultant, aiming at change and mutual learning processes within the organization. With ethnography, the interaction is based on reflexivity: the researcher observes and reflects upon the meanings of the observed. The end result is classically a realist story, the ethnography (although there are many more novel genres and styles of writing, see Van Maanen, 1988). As for narrative collage, the end result is also a story, but the genre is different: it is an invented story, or fiction. Action Research is designed around interactions of experimental learning and the result is creative change, for the organization as well as the consultant (Chrostowski, 2005). The stories are only teaching tools, a means to an end.

NARRATIVE COLLAGE IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE SETTINGS

The process of constructing a narrative collage can be illustrated by the following model:

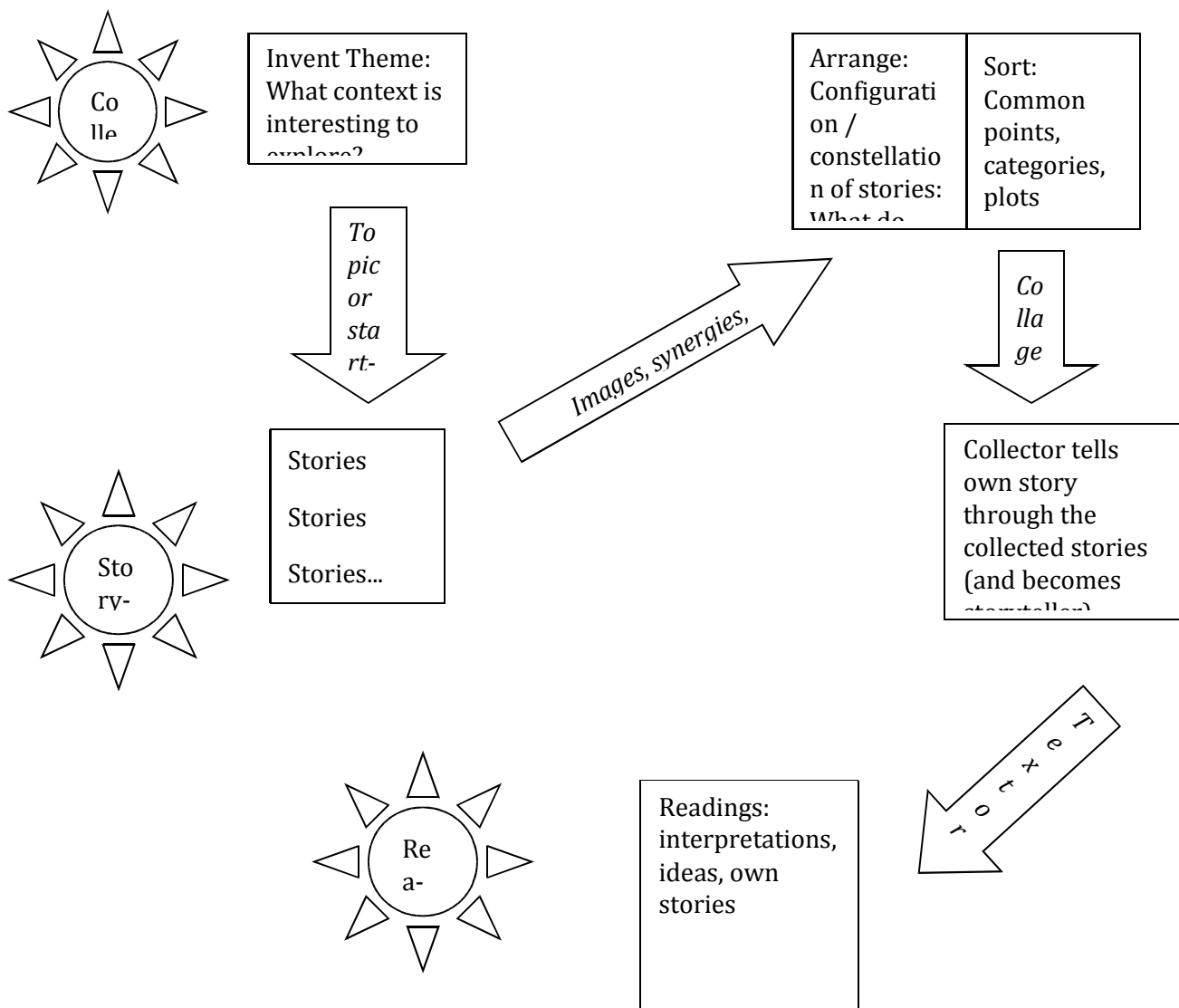


Fig. 1. The process of constructing a narrative collage.

The figure represents the process of creating a narrative collage. Individual uses of the method may differ, especially by researchers, who may want to assemble a more elaborate or multi-level procedure of gathering stories and making sense of them. The model may more adequately reflect the process in practical settings, because the aim is usually more straightforward. The collector (author of the collage) first comes up with the theme for the collection. A researcher may wish to explore the cultural context of a frequently used term, for example quality. A practitioner may want to learn how his or her employees envision the relationship between the company and its customers. The collector then begins the collection process, by asking others to write or to tell a short story about quality, or customer relations. Alternatively, he or she can provide the respondents with a starting line, such as: "Once upon a time there was a queen who only wanted the best of the best to be seen in her castle..." or "Once upon a time a customer knocked on the door of a technician..." The authors should be told what form the story may take, what the preferred genre is and how long the story should be. Don't forget to provide a deadline!

After a while the stories arrive. There are often interesting synergies between them, and taken together they may form an image. There may also be meta-plots to be found in the collection. The collector arranges stories and looks for configurations and constellations of images and plots. Then the stories are sorted and the emerging order is now the finished collage. Through the presentation of the collage in a form of a meta-story or an anthology of stories with an editorial commentary, the collector now becomes a storyteller herself. The final text or visual presentation is directed at the readers, who make sense of it and interpret it (and perhaps re-tell the story further).

The more complicated way of constructing a collage may be preferred by researchers who are likely to explore major plots and smaller subplots, as well as investigate several layers of the cultural context, for example, looking for myths or cultural values. The preferred form for the researchers is definitely the written form that can be analyzed and carefully studied. Traditionally, scientific discourse has a strong predilection for the written form. In practice settings, however, there is much to be said for the keeping of the oral and visual form both in the stage of collecting stories (they can be verbally told and recorded on tape) and in the stage of final presentation. The collector can perform such a "live presentation" to the audience and literally become an organizational *storyteller*. In this way, the contact between the collector and the readers is much closer and there are some very interesting possibilities of feedback. The story thus created can almost immediately become a living performative – people are likely to take it out of the conference room and into their standard work setting. This is how stories work in traditional cultures and we can use it in our work organization with some considerable advantage (Hatch, Kostera and Kozminski, 2005).

To summarize, the narrative collage is, just as other narrative methods, an experiential method of gaining insight into social phenomena. There are several levels of experience at work in the collection process: the researcher's, the authors', that of the characters in the stories and the readers' (when they get to read the complete text). Experiential learning happens between the editor and the author as well as between the readers and the text. It concerns the deeper layers of the cultural context, touching and inspiring imagination.

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