

## NARRATIVE THERAPY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE MANAGEMENT: POSSIBLE ARTICULATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

The word narrative has become popular in recent times. Disseminated by the media, among other contexts, it appears in political analyses and in discussions about fictional works. In addition to its strictly communicational aspects, the narrative element plays a central role in a clinical, therapeutic, psychological and social approach: narrative therapy. The present study aimed to analyze a possible approximation of the use of practices developed in the field of narrative therapy in works focused on the management of organizational culture (a field traditionally more associated with other knowledge, such as organizational psychology and business administration). In this approach, we sought points of discussion and concepts from studies on organizational culture and others derived from narrative practices, originally developed in the field of narrative therapy. Despite the practical and epistemological challenges, the approximation of the knowledge that emerges from these two fields of study is fruitful, rich in possibilities for organizations and for people who experience their professional activities in them or who can benefit from their social impacts.

**Keywords:** Narrative therapy. Organizational culture. Narratives.

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## INTRODUCTION

The term narrative has been increasingly present in everyday life. The media often resort to it to refer to the way in which the various social actors describe their positions, worldviews, versions of the facts. The term is even used in political analysis: understanding how public men weave their stories and seek to consolidate the best version of themselves before public opinion. The expression "war of narratives" is not uncommon when it comes to reading controversial facts or events. In a view of the term extracted from the dictionary entry, the word narrative refers, in summary, to the report of one or several events chained together, which may be real, imaginary or fictional (Dicionário Online de Portuguese, n.d.).

In companies, as in other institutions (human groups), the act of telling stories is also present. In a more systematized way, it has been present for decades in case studies, often presented in the format of *storytelling* – in synthesis and bringing the term to Portuguese, narration of a story. The main objective of these studies involving narratives in companies is the training of employees and the dissemination of lessons learned – successful or unsuccessful experiences lived by the organization itself or by similar organizations. Oral memory projects have also been developed in companies for many years. In this type of project, the employees themselves or other stakeholders of the organization take the lead in the history of their institutions and tell the history of the company from their personal experiences. Thus, a very rich mosaic of views of the institution is produced, enabling a much broader and more detailed understanding of the organization than that produced by carefully edited versions. These versions (the edited ones) evidently have their space and fulfill their role in the world of marketing and business, but which may miss important nuances of organizations. Nuances, in turn, precious for the managers of the companies themselves in their efforts to manage the culture of the organizations.

In Brazil, oral memory projects have been carried out in institutions such as Banco Itaú, Votorantim, Petrobras and others (Museu da Pessoa, n.d.) *element*. The basis of this type of work is the view that each subject is an agent of history and, therefore, a source of knowledge for their organizations and for society itself. The story, narrated by each person, forms a picture of perceptions about the events that took place in the institution. In this narration of events, cultural traits are transmitted and can be perpetuated through stories. And, as Nassar and Parente (2020) underline, companies are their stories. Organizations, in order to be noticed and remembered by their stakeholders, create, constitute and feed the visions of their brands with narratives.

In fact, narratives are one of the main elements of the communicational act (Sá Martino, 2016). Through the stories told, in addition to the transmission of content, bonds



(cognitive and affective) are established. An act of encounter takes place between the one who tells and the one who listens to the story. And, being an act of encounter, it is also an act of bonding, of bonding, and of social and political constitution (Gerbner, 1999; Motta, 2012). Observing the narrative bases on which organizational culture is transmitted and perpetuated brings with it, in turn, a strong potential for understanding the elements of the culture itself (Schein, 2004/2020).

From another perspective, diverse and very rich in possibilities, we have the field of narrative in the context of a therapeutic approach: narrative therapy. Having become better known among specialists in the humanities and social sciences (notably psychologists and social workers) due to the work of Michael White (social worker, author and narrative therapist), narrative therapy proposes, based on post-structuralist philosophical bases, a decentered therapeutic practice (in which the therapist's knowledge is not the central axis of the therapeutic work). It also proposes the search, in diversity and richness, narratives of broader horizons for those who seek help. From this perspective, regardless of their social, historical or biological conditioning factors and beyond psychological or psychiatric disorders, the subject cannot be reduced to their problem. The subject, the human being that he is, is also seen as an agent of his history, the protagonist of his narrative.

The objective of the present work is to discuss the possible use of concepts and techniques, originally developed in the field of narrative therapy, in works for companies (or other organizations, in general). More specifically, consulting work that, with a focus on observing the organizational culture, aims to improve people management and internal communication processes.

It is understood that the approximation of this knowledge can broaden the perspectives of action in the organizational field, benefiting it with reflections and practices that have already been used in the clinical field and in social work. It should be noted here that, as relevant economic and social agents that they are, companies have an immense possibility of social transformation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology for this work will be the review of texts on organizational culture and the literature on narrative therapy. A brief synthesis of organizational culture and narratives will be presented. Next, some practices and concepts of narrative therapy will be discussed. Finally, the risks and possibilities of the articulation of different fields of knowledge will be discussed.



## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND NARRATIVES

Companies, in the face of their management challenges, understood the relevance of studying their organizational cultures. It is already common sense in the business environment that, without working on the organizational culture, the desired management changes are not sustainable. Efforts and resources are invested aiming at cultural changes. Analyzed in detail, HR management processes or internal communication plans generally have this objective: to transform or consolidate a certain organizational culture. The degree of clarity that organizations have about this when they invest in campaigns or redesigns of processes or structures is varied, but, in general, there is, to some extent, this intention (Loureiro, 2006). Programs aimed at the internal public usually aim to influence and transform values, attitudes and behaviors of employees. With this, they seek to promote the meeting or, in business jargon, the "alignment" with the values established by the organization and engagement in the execution of the business strategy.

As is well known, however, the human and social phenomenon is complex, and, even with a lot of investment, the efforts of organizations to manage their cultures and generate identification with their employees or other stakeholders are not always successful (Loureiro, 2006; Figueiredo, 2006). The contemporary world, with its intense and rapid transformations, brings additional challenges to this endeavor. The transparency and visibility that the media currently allow, notably social networks, means that inconsistencies, no matter how small, can be perceived, often destroying the reputations of organizations. Reputation, in turn, has become a highly coveted attribute for companies, an increasingly important differential in times of consumer and investor choices. Likewise, *the identification with the values and purposes of the brands they consume, the organizations where they invest their capital, the companies with which they do business or for which they work* gains relevance for the relationship audiences (company stakeholders).

In this scenario, superficiality is a risk. It is essential for companies to be well grounded in purposes and values. And, for this to occur, it is important that there is an identification and dissemination of these same purposes and values among the groups of people that compose them. The organization needs to make sense to the subjects who are part of it. Attention to narratives in the business environment is part of this context. Narratives understood as a communicational element, as structured stories, capable of producing meaning, but not only that: elements of creation of cognitive and affective bonds and, therefore, also capable of constituting social groups (Sá Martino, 2016; Motta, 2012; Gerbner, 1999), such as those that make up organizations. That is, narratives as elements that help structure the cultural framework of an organization.



In a globalized and fast-paced world, in which distances are overcome in clicks from notebooks and smartphones, the traditional human habit of sitting in a circle and telling and listening to stories is reconfigured in form, but maintains its essential components. The concern with relating, describing, telling and sharing their story and trying to make explicit the meaning of their choices becomes part of the daily life of groups and organizations. Social networks have become the great contemporary "bonfires" around which people and organizations gather and tell their stories. They do so in a contemporary way: fragmented, in strobe rhythm, sometimes excessive. However, they cannot do without coherence in their speeches, nor a basis in terms of purpose and values in the common thread of their narratives, because if something disconnected transpires, the risk of seeing their reputations destroyed is quite great, see all the discussion about "cancel culture" now in vogue.

## **NARRATIVE THERAPY**

Narratives, which, as mentioned in item 3 of the present study, are most commonly seen in their communicational aspects in the business environment, in narrative therapy are associated with therapeutic objectives. But, despite the differences in objectives regarding the narrative element, the idea of a logical chain, the formation of meaning and the presence of psychological aspects are common to both approaches: communicational and therapeutic. Narrative therapy, which became well known in specialized circles for the teachings of Michel White (White, 2012), was constituted from a post-structuralist philosophical proposal. And, in this sense, in the view of the present author, despite its specificities, it is a little closer to the philosophical bases of the psychological approaches traditionally called "third force" in psychology (as opposed to behaviorism and psychoanalysis, which would be the other two other "forces"). Thus, associating the view that the knowledge of the human and social sciences, different from the knowledge of the natural sciences, would be of another order – more properly human and sociocultural, moving somewhat away from the determinisms of biology or the other natural sciences.

One of the maxims of narrative therapy, perhaps the best known, is the idea that the person should not be confused with the problem they experience: the person is the person, the problem is the problem. To reduce the human being to his vicissitudes, whatever they may be, is, in a way, to limit him even in his potentialities to solve the problems he faces. From this view, the practices of externalization emerge in narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) And, in this sense, it is also worth mentioning the proximity of the approach to one of the lines of the "third force" in psychology, specifically the phenomenological-



existential approach: the view that a human being is not an "in himself" but an unfinished work, a "for himself". The view that existence precedes essence, the idea that the subject is built throughout his existential journey. The concept so present in narrative therapy that the subject "is" not the problem, resonates with the existentialist idea of the possibility of the human being to construct himself based on the circumstances that surround him. With emphasis on the works of Heidegger and Sartre (Heidegger, 1990; Sartre, 1970), the human being, in this view, cannot be defined purely and only as "something", as an "in itself". Therefore, to confuse him with the problem he experiences would be to limit him and incarcerate him in his suffering.

From the organizational point of view, in an analogous way, thinking of the institution also as openness and possibilities, not confusing it with the difficulties that the group that composes it faces, separating it from the problem, externalizing it, can also be a path rich in possibilities. Especially if we think about small or medium-sized organizations, often of family origin. Facilitating their processes by strengthening their powers, their base values, can be very positive. And in view of the percentage participation of this type of organization in the Brazilian (and world) economy, the effects of this type of facilitation also have a lot of potential for social transformation.

On the other hand, the practice of "narrative maps" (White, 2012), without concern for objectively associating them with the starting point, in philosophical terms, for Michael White and the other authors to develop them (in his writings Michael White speaks of his own attraction and curiosity for maps from an early age), seems to the present author, a perspective that starts from the vision of a multifaceted reality (and with multiple paths or routes) and of a subject that is author and protagonist of his story. It is up to the therapist, then, from the decentered posture that the approach proposes, to facilitate the unveiling of a journey that belongs to the subject. For this, in addition to the suggestions of the maps, the interest and respectful curiosity of a subject when meeting another subject – both agents of his stories – capable of feeling the feelings of the other resonate in him.

Once again here, the technique of narrative therapy should be useful in the business environment. The posture of a consultant can be like a narrative therapist, decentered. The use of maps for this facilitation can also be beneficial. A realistic and respectful understanding of the self-determination of the group of subjects that make up the organization can be valuable for the group to build its own solutions to face the challenges of the institution.

Another very interesting concept developed within the scope of narrative therapy practices is that of "absent, but implicit". In a "free understanding" of the concept, a kind of



"background" of perceptions. That is, what is "absent" can be understood as what plays the background role, so that the problem in focus is the figure. What the concept and the technique arising from the "absent but implicit" propose is the focus on this "background", with the possible question: what premises would be underlying the action that develops in the plane that stands out - in the "foreground" often experienced as the problem? Beyond the manifest issue (or problem), it is possible to observe what was not said, but what also made the existence of the "scene" (experienced situation) possible. By making explicit the absent, which is actually more implicit than actually absent, the person, the subject, the agent of his own history, has the possibility of retelling it in other terms, perhaps more generous with himself. Richer terms of existential possibilities.

Here, once again seeking the articulation of knowledge from narrative therapy and studies in the field of organizational culture, it is worth remembering the concept of premises in the work of Professor Edgar Schein (2004/2020). According to Schein, there are three levels in what is called organizational culture: the most basic of them would be the level of the organization's premises or purposes; the intermediate level would be that of values and norms; and, finally, at a more easily observable level, there would be the so-called artifacts of culture – myths, rites, symbols, etc. The premises, as mentioned, have a central role and relevance in the author's view, but as well as in the idea contained in the concept of "more implicit absentee", they are not always highlighted. In a bridge between these two theoretical frameworks, one can think that what Schein calls premises often fulfill the role of the "absent but implicit" in organizations. Facilitating the connection of organizations with their own premises (not always postulated in their communication pieces and not always so explicit), can be very relevant. It can help them in their management efforts and relationship with their stakeholders.

## THE ARTICULATION OF DIFFERENT FIELDS OF KNOWLEDGE

The present work articulates different theories and fields of knowledge (associated with clinical practice and organizational culture). Each of the fields has its own authors and constructs, which in itself carries with it epistemological and methodological issues. If within the field of psychology alone – citing one of the disciplines involved – there is already a profusion of distinct philosophical and epistemological matrices (Figueiredo, 1991), providing the basis for practices in the application of this discipline that, in order to coexist in an articulated way in research, require clarity from the researcher (Loureiro & Silva, 1997), when the articulation extends to other fields of knowledge, The challenge of convergence is



further radicalized. However, the premise here is that bridges between knowledge, in addition to complexity, generate a wealth of possibilities.

Articulating different fields of knowledge, involving some of the so-called human and social sciences, seems to be an overlapping of challenges. However, despite the complexity and difficulty it brings to research and practice, clinical or organizational, the problems as they present themselves in the existential reality of people and their organizations do not obey the rigors of disciplinary cuts. And therefore, there is a need to build bridges between the various fields of knowledge and practices. The ability to, through reason, shed light on knowledge about problems that afflict human beings, in the various dimensions of their lives, and contribute to the construction of solutions, is a promise of science and should also be a commitment of the various professionals who work socially, whether in their clinical, academic or organizational practices.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The clinical, therapeutic, psychological or social care field is complex and fertile for the development of various techniques and approaches. In the same way, working on or with an organization or even, more specifically, a company, is also very complex, although the factors that make up such complexity are different: legal, economic, productive, accounting, safety-related, environmental, and social aspects, in short, innumerable. In common to these two fields: the human. And, in this sense, all the learning that the concepts and practices derived from narrative therapy provide, adapted to the needs and demands of organizations when they request help, can be quite powerful. Especially when the help requested refers to management issues and relationships with its stakeholders (especially its employees) or, in a more focused way, to the management of its culture.

In the present work, the concepts of externalizing narrative therapy, off-center posture, narrative maps, "absent plus implicit" were mentioned. Many other concepts and practices could be analyzed and investigated in terms of possible adaptations for use in the organizational field. Future research or theoretical developments can launch themselves on this path. Organizations, especially business organizations, have a strong potential for social transformation: due to the productive possibility, capacity to generate jobs, environmental and social impact in the regions in which they operate or that can influence their supply chains – in short, due to the economic power they have. As is unfortunately known, countless times, in a conservative way, such economic power only maintains the status quo and reproduces inequalities. There is no room or time for naivety. However, on the other hand, two points need to be remembered: first, there is a very large diversity of



companies, from large conglomerates to small family-owned companies. Jobs that focus on the group of small and medium-sized companies can play a very relevant social role, just by helping them to survive in the market. Large companies, in turn, are starting to pay more attention to topics such as sustainability, social responsibility, and others related to the so-called ESG (*environmental, social, and governance*) agenda. Second and perhaps the most central point at this moment: organizations are made up of people. Therefore, humans, agents and protagonists of their stories. Living beings immersed in their vicissitudes, their doubts and the need to fulfill the value and meaning of their own existences. Subjects of history, in turn, collectively constructed. Reconnecting organizations – this very special group of people – with their premises, their most fundamental values, with the power of being agents of their own stories, can be an interesting path of social transformation.



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