

The Rhetoric of a Corporate Job: from Enthusiasm to Desperation Decisions and Patterns of Staying and Leaving

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Abstract: My main research interest concerned the decisional processes of corporate employees when leaving their company, as they appear in retrospective accounts. I used discursive analysis of interview accounts to inquire into relationships between organizational identities and personal identities, and their shifting career dynamics. I studied how people construct their professional quests by investigating the discursive structure of the accounts involved in their professional stories. At the same time, I tried to figure out how people deal with their corporate and personal nested identities over time, presenting ‘corporations’ both as working environments and moral actors. I aimed to explain how people make use of various constructs of ‘corporation’ as scaffold for their stories and as interpretive frame for their professional and personal worlds. My analysis was grounded on a constructivist approach and sensible to the interviewees’ work of self-presentation. I also paid attention to the interactions people talk about and to the cultural resources they used in conversation. I favoured a narrative analytical perspective, given that respondents often presented their decisional processes in story-like form. Moreover, I took gender into consideration as a possible source of discursive patterns. As a research method, I used focused narrative interviews. I conducted 10 focused interviews with actual and former employees from different industries: media, IT and pharmaceuticals. My research work to date indicates that various types of narrative patterns emerge when interviewees recollect their working experiences. The most salient refers to a sequence of emotions presented in discourse, from enthusiasm to desperation. As a rule, the ‘corporation’ is constructed as an either good or a reluctant working environment depending on the moment of the story. Corporations on the whole gradually become personified, in later stages of the disengagement narrative, becoming important characters in employee’s stories. Agency is embedded in the organization and quickens the alienation process people go through.

Keywords: employer; corporation; narrative; decisional processes; discursive patterns

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Introduction

My research was focused on the decisional processes employees undergo since entering a corporation and until they decide to leave these specific working places, represented in retrospective accounts. Thus, I wanted to find out how the processes unfold and how they can be explained from the inside, by the employee and from the outside, by the researcher.

Some of the questions I had in mind when working on my research are the following:

- Which are the main decisional processes emerging from corporate employees' recollections about their professional experiences?
- How do the corporate employees' organizational engagement and disengagement processes unfold and how can they be explained?
- How do former employees from different industries story the corporate experience they had? What patterns emerge when people tell their professional stories?
- Which are the main characters involved in the process?

Furthermore, there are two other directions of study that I decided to introduce in my analysis given the opportunities of understanding they offer:

- The corporation as 'construct' (Marinescu-Nenciu, 2014) that the employees invoke in various forms, ranging from 'environment' to 'social actor', in order to account for their professional decisions;
- The issue of the employees' nested and interlocking identities: corporate and personal, and the way people manage their identity during processes of organizational engagement and disengagement.

Methodologically, I collected data by selecting current and former corporate employees alike in terms of age, education and income from different industries. I chose them using the snow-ball method. Each interviewee recommended me another person who would fit the target group of my study. Until the end, I gathered a collection of 10 interviews which covered three main domains: media, IT and pharmaceuticals.

From starters I want to emphasize that, notwithstanding the interviewee's gender or field of work, a description of the company was important for setting the stage of the entire professional adventure. Only by evoking its specificities did people construct their stories. Corporations came with their own vocabulary. A plethora of

expressions are to be found in people's accounts. The ones setting foot in such an organization become 'corporate people' and embrace the 'corporate life' prone to slowly stir up their disappointment.

Corporations on the whole also became personified, evolving into important characters in employees' stories. Agency was embedded in the organization and quickened the alienation process people went through.

Methodological Aspects

My analysis was grounded on *a constructivist approach* (Silverman, 2004; Dunn, 2005) and sensitive to *the work of self-presentation* done by the interviewees (Goffman, 1959; Bruner, 1997; Byrne, 2003).

Regarding the plurality of actors, one of the most important roles in a corporate employee's decisional process regarding his/ her job is played by the Human Resources (HR) representative, one of the main persons in charge with hiring and dismissing an employee. In the future I therefore plan to also conduct interviews with HR professionals.

The research approach used in the present study was meant to emphasize the outcomes of qualitative analysis in terms of *discursive patterns*.

I designed, conducted and interpreted focused narrative interviews with corporate employees, men and women, quite similar in terms of age, income and education but different with regard to the industry they worked in.

Narrative interviews are one of the four main approaches of narrative use in the field of quality improvement research. Naturalistic story gathering, organizational case study and collective sense-making are considered to be the other three approaches in this field (Greenhalgh, Russell, Swinglehurst, 2005). Given the features of the chosen method, my analysis was grounded on a narrative – emotionalist approach (Watson, 2009; Byrne, 2003) being at the same time sensitive to the work of self-presentation done by the interviewees (Goffman, 1959; Bruner, 1997; Byrne, 2003).

I selected my interviewees using *the snow-ball method* as a non-probability sampling technique (Babbie, 2010) and I conducted focused unstructured interviews due to the opportunities the method provides for the given subject of interest.

Unstructured interviews make use of unstandardized questions which provide answers that sometimes limit the number of possible comparisons (Bailey, K., 1978, p.183 *in* Chelcea, S, 2007, p.310). To somehow deal with this limitation I guided the discussion with my interviewees such as to encourage narrative accounts of their professional experiences, and I focused on several key issues for my analysis – including their relationship with the HR department, the emergence of the decision to leave the company, the moment of leaving and its aftermath.

The scaffold of my research consisted in: a) discourse analysis sensible to the interactional and narrative understanding of self-presentation, on the one hand, and b) interpretations of interview interactions, on the other hand.

The Construct of ‘Corporation’

Organizations and corporations have been theorized for a long time, in scientific communities of reflection as well as within organizational departments themselves, formally and informally. Scholars, professionals, managers, and employees in all walks of life advance changing theories (lay and professional) of organizational life, rich with metaphors and moral implications.

The first scientific approaches looked at organizations from a mechanical perspective (Taylor, 1911; Weber, 1968) meant to explain their efficiency through the rationality of their structure, that ‘one best way’ independent of political or social contexts. During the ‘70s, Chandler (1977) and Berle (1965) introduced a paradigm switch: from isolated establishments belonging to wealthy manufacturers, organizations were taken to the realm of ‘managerial capitalism’ demanding for knowledgeable managers capable of transforming the old businesses in large, prosperous companies. Searching for manners to increase profit, different approaches were used by economists, sociologists and psychologists altogether. Mayo and Roethlisberger’s experiments organized at the Hawthorne factories between 1927 and 1933 brought by the ‘human relations paradigm’. Considering the social relations taking place at work, the research concluded that networking influences productivity at a greater extent than working conditions or other incentives as salary do. Some years later, the company as ‘iron cage’ paradigm (1968) was introduced by Weber. His approach was meant to underline the compelling manner organizational culture works, picturing employees as ‘trapped’ and in a loss for creativity and independence.

A resembling discursive approach is to be found nowadays in employees' recollections regarding their working experiences in large companies. Given this observation, I decided to study 'the corporation' as discursive construct when assessing a narrative analysis on people's stories about their job experiences, the way they deal with their emotions regarding this specific working environment, and the way other characters interfere.

Research Outcome

The corporate world and corporate employees have represented a topic of interest lately especially due to extended media discussions regarding working in corporations that deprive employees of their health and personal time. Moreover, recent studies showed that an increasing number of employees decided to leave their corporate jobs and looked for different types of working places.

At the same time, people tell stories about each and every aspect of their lives and working experiences make no exception being an important realm of their nowadays existence. If until recently, the discursive emphasis was put on the satisfaction of having a stable job for a long period, even for the whole life, notwithstanding various individually driven concepts as self-contentment, a clear change in discourse could be empirically observed during the last years with people talking more and more about companies as good or bad working environments, about their feelings in relation with their jobs or about their decisions either to stay or to leave the companies they work for. People discuss about feeling 'trapped' or 'limited', 'appreciated' or 'in a lack of professional feed-back'.

Within this research paper I was primarily concerned with figuring out and analysing the processes of organizational disengagement people undergo in order to explain why corporate employees decide to give up working in a certain corporation or stick to their jobs. To accomplish this scientific goal, I took into account corporate specificities and aimed to define the corporation as a social organization, emphasizing on the discourse specificities belonging to employees working in autochthonous corporations. Starting from these premises, I tried to explain the following emotions sequence emerging from corporate employees discourses about their professional experiences: enthusiasm – disappointment – anger – desperation. In addition, I tried to figure out how characters, their relationships and their interactions were organized in stories about social actors and competencies in order to construct corporate working environments as good or

vicious. With this respect, I focused on the narration of the events prior to people's leaving, but I also took into consideration the way people reconstructed their entire working experience in order to legitimize their decisions (Hirshman, 1970; Dunn, 2005; Hopper, 1999) to either stay or leave certain corporations.

The whole analysis was assessed by looking into the choice of motives (Mills, 1940) made during the narration when talking about attitudes, behaviors or decisions and into the word phrasing used to verbalize these motivations. In this spirit, contrast structures (Smith, 1990), situational arguments (Geest, 1991; Hopper, 1999; Dunn, 2005; Desantis, 2003), humor, irony and categorization (Attardo, 2001) were of interest for observing and studying the decisional processes employees underwent.

To figure out professional disengagement patterns, I considered the fact that in conversation people tell stories that would help them get around and make out the world surrounding them. They put together facts, events, opinions, and interactions and build up accounts that would organize this otherwise chaotic mix of knowledge. Often, the narrator is also positioned as a hero who faces certain trials in order to reach a goal. Moreover, when talking about things they recollect, people make clear their perspectives on different situations or interactions. During this process, they choose to mention some aspects and forget about others as they categorize people as good or bad characters (Gabriel, 2004; Watson, 2009).

Thus, I looked into the way employees' professional stories unfold in terms of narrative elements as theme, exposition, climax, characters, trials or endings. Taking into consideration an already observed gendered narrative discourse (discussed by Butler, 1997 or Byrne, 2003) I used women and men as two different categories of analysis when looking into discourse specificities.

Discussion

My research work pointed to the fact that various patterns emerged when interviewees recollected their working experiences.

The first pattern refers to a frequently found story-like construction of recollections, even when I did not explicitly invite this form through my questions. People's narrations include expositions, climaxes, all sorts of good and bad characters and trials they have to overcome.

A second important pattern was observable in the flow of feelings presented in the

narrations. Notwithstanding the type of experience, all the stories follow a pattern starting with an enthusiastic image of them feeling deeply compatible with their new jobs. Then, a process of alienation is described, followed closely by desperation.

A third notable pattern concerns gender: women have a tendency to construct their experiences as mostly interactional, while men have a more self-centred and dynamic approach.

People rationalized their working experiences in order to legitimize the situations they narrated as well as their decisions to leave the jobs. Their present identities of former employees were also often invoked, rationalized and legitimized as such. During the legitimization process, the interviewees used discourse resources like humour, irony or self-regulatory speech.

Notwithstanding the type of experience corporate employees depicted, all the stories followed the same pattern of feelings: from enthusiasm to desperation. All recollections started with the people feeling deeply compatible with their new jobs and the company they entered. Progressively, a process of alienation was described, followed closely by deceit and desperation as people said to unveil 'the truth' regarding the working environment. Towards the end, their decision to leave brought them either to a 'martyrian' or to 'a hero' like hypostasis.

In this context, the 'corporate environment' was depicted as an enchanted territory where uncountable dreams of becoming may be fulfilled. The metamorphosis of the organizations endorsed the employees' pattern of feelings. All the interviewees talked at starters about the mirage of a large company where they thought to find professional accomplishment and ended up telling what a great disappointment they faced when the organization became the cause of all their sorrows. The 'corporation as moral actor' also played an important part in the employees' discourse meant to legitimize their decisions to leave their jobs. Still, as time went by, former employees' attitude towards corporations became one of resignation or even of gratefulness for the accumulated experience. Once out and backing away from 'the damned woods', people tended to underline the positive aspects of their adventure.

As a rule, the 'company' was constructed as an either good or a reluctant working environment depending on the moment of the story. Still, a slightly different approach was displayed by the interviewees who were working in such an organization at the time of the discussion after having left a former corporate job before. They emphasized more on the structural particularities of the corporations

they were part of and were less virulent when invoking general knowledge regarding the corporation as a former working environment. Moreover, they were highly preoccupied with legitimizing their professional image.

By contrast, all the others talked about large companies in rough terms using words as ‘slaves’, ‘being lashed in order to produce more’ or about repeated carelessness on the part of the managers. Plus, the corporate environment was described as a medium where one might fit only if he / she was ‘built’ in such a manner. Moreover, the corporate environment was depicted as a place where one could get ill because of exhaustion or progressively lose their friends because of staying after hours to complete once work. Still, in order to stick to the image of knowledgeable, accountable persons, all the employees said they undergone important, mind-provoking professional experiences even if most of them wouldn’t recommend them to anyone else.

Referring to gender as discursive pattern, women had the tendency to globally construct their experience as mostly interacting with the corporation and the people inside, while men had a dynamic approach, centred on themselves and on their professional accomplishments, considering the organizations mostly a means for their professional becoming.

Among the corporate traits most frequently mentioned there were both ‘money’ and ‘managers’. ‘Superiors’ represented a clear cut category of negative characters within all the stories whereas ‘money’ was always depicted as a secondary account. The interviewees frequently found other grounds that would explain their request for more ‘money’, like not really needing a bigger salary or the fact that they wouldn’t have left for better wages notwithstanding, thus confirming the human relations approach.

The interviewees frequently used regulatory discursive tools such as humour and irony to legitimize their decisions of staying or leaving, but also to narrate different situations prone to make them get progressively alienated and finally desperate in relation with their workplace and the corporation as a whole. As a rule, whenever they chose to narrate an episode that according to generally accepted rules of conduct would put them in a peculiar position in front of the researcher, people made jokes especially on themselves underlining their poor judgement when analysing their corporate working environment when getting hired or overestimating the outcome of the jobs when taking them.

Moreover, the interviewees emphasized on their ingenuity when applying for

different positions in the corporations stating that they were taken in by either the good name of the company, the brand, or by the highly competitive corporate environment they were imbued in immediately after being hired, an appealing source of adrenaline at starters – a powerful ground for disengagement in the end.

Conclusion

My research was inspired by the versatility of the post-modern employee and is prone to open new study dimensions for the social organization of corporate working experience. At the same time, it aims at pointing at conclusions that might be applied in practice.

The different approach men and women have when coming to interactions might determine employers to find accordingly different incentives helping people not to enter the alienation phase of their working experiences. Moreover, managers might conduct personalized studies in their companies in order to find out how the process unfolds from enthusiasm to desperation and try to find out the narrative patterns that appear within the stories told by their employees.

Given an additional industry grounded focus of the present research in the future, various different patterns may also emerge and might be used by Human Resources departments in companies to manage their personnel in specific manners. In conclusion, both parties, employers and workers, would have insights to gain. Corporate employees would conserve their enthusiasm for longer, being more efficient while managers would be able to work more with the same people, not having to hire new personnel and permanently invest in a useless induction process. Moreover, current and future employees might also use the conclusions of this study to mirror and manage their own work experiences.

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