Chapter 5

Organizational Identity Negotiations through Dominant and Counter-Narratives.

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Introduction

> The role of the ticket inspector is – and it is still fundamental in my view of the terminology and the soul of the company – to take care of the customers. Furthermore, the concept is, of course, talking to Mr. And Mrs. Smith, when they get on the train […and…] to take care of those who do not have their ticket. (Ticket inspector at E-rail).

E-rail is a European-based public rail service – an organization that is domestically well known - not for something good, however. 'Scandals' are frequently in the news in relation to its financial endeavors and unethical behaviors. Especially, the ticket inspectors have been criticized for being brutal and in-human kicking off, fining or verbally insulting the passengers, such as children or handicapped. In this paper, we focus on how the ticket inspectors manage such identity threats by using counter-narratives in their story work to construct alternative versions of 'who they are' and 'what they do' creating multiple, yet rather stable, understandings of the organizational identity in their own story-telling community.

To arrive at such insights, we first introduce literature on organizational identity formations linking the construction of the organizational identity to the micro-level story work of the organizational members. Subsequently, we introduce our generation of empirical data along with our thematic, structural and performative approach to analyze the counter-narratives found in the case study of E-rail. In the findings section, we first introduce the dominant narratives of the media and management before we examine the clusters of counter-narratives in depth - both opposing and constructing an alternative version of 'reality' than the dominant narratives.

Organizational identity as conversations between outsiders and insiders

Within organizational research there has been an increased interest in the dynamic, polyphonic and open-ended nature of organizational identity. Several scholars argue that organizational identity is not only constituted in the conversations between organizational members but also constructed through conversations between outsiders and insiders. Hatch and Schultz (2002) point to the interplay between external discourse forming the organizational image, management, whose official stories narrate the organizational vision and the employees' stories, whose individual narratives are rooted in the organizational culture. Coupland and Brown (2004) claim that "organizations are best characterized by having multiple identities, and that these identities are authored in conversations between notional 'insiders', and between notional 'insiders' and 'outsiders' (2004, 1325). Similarly, Boje claims that organizations are "(…) existing to tell their collective stories, to live out their collective stories, to be in constant struggle over getting the stories of insiders and outsiders straight. It is a sense-making that is coming into being but not/never finished or concluded in narrative retrospection. (2001, 4).

The interplay between outsiders, management and employees has been studied in contexts of identity threats posed by a poor organizational image (Dutton and Duckerich 1991; Frandsen, 2012) as well as within celebrity organizations (Kjærgaard, Morsing and Ravasi, 2011). The ambition of this paper is to contribute to this line of research by proposing a narrative approach to the study of organizational identity and sense-making processes (Brown, 2006; Chreim, 2005; 2007; Coupland & Brown, 2004; Humphreys & Brown, 2002), with a specific focus on the role of 'counter-narratives' (Bamberg and Andrews 2004; Boje, 2006; Linde 2001; 2009). Thus, we connect matters of identity construction to the conversations between outsiders and insiders, and particularly, we turn our attention towards the everyday story work and struggles of organizational members as they go about their daily work negotiating what they do and who they are as individuals, groups and as an organization.

Organizational identity as everyday storytelling practices

The growing interest among scholars of organizational identity in polyphonic and dynamic identity formation reflects an increased focus on the intertwined nature of the relationship between individual, collective and organizational identity construction processes (Coupland and Brown 2004; Humphreys and Brown 2002). The complex understanding of identity as something that is constantly in a flux of being negotiated and retold is by now well established (Belova 2010; Chreim 2005). Furthermore, many scholars view individual, collective and organizational self-understandings as intertwined and something that is continuously reconstructed, negotiated and enacted in daily dialogues and practices in and around pluralistic and polyphonic organizations (Hazen 1993; Humphreys and Brown 2002).

Similar to various other scholars, we focus on narrative aspects of individual and organizational identity construction processes (Chreim 2005; Chreim 2007; Coupland and

Brown 2004; Driver 2009; Humphreys and Brown 2002; Linde 2001; 2009) and acknowledge storytelling to be central to sense-making and identity construction processes "(...) narratives are the means by which we organize and make sense of our experience and evaluate our actions and intentions" (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012, 66). In addition, we turn our attention to the everyday storytelling practices of organizational members as important in the understanding of the identity formation process (Humphreys and Brown 2002; Linde 2001; Linde 2009).

Paying attention to the everyday storytelling practices of organizational members makes it possible to study the many voices of organizations and the polyphonic nature of organizational storytelling in the construction of organizational identity. Linde (2009) demonstrates how organizational storytelling practices are both polyphonic and have stabilizing effects, creating coherence and a sense of continuity among organizational members. The organization can be seen as a storytelling community (Linde 2009) where different understandings of organizational identity are negotiated and passed on to new members through every day storytelling practices. We adopt Linde's (2009) image of organizations as storytelling communities to conceptualize how organizational contexts create certain storytelling conditions affecting the story work of individual members. We want to draw attention to the media as an important and dominating voice influencing the identity formation processes of organizations.

Studies outside the narrative approach have demonstrated that media attention has significant influence on organizational identity formation processes (Dutton and Duckerich 1991; Elsback and Kramer 1996; Kjærgaard, Morsing and Ravasi 2011). Differing narratives between outsiders and insiders may be conceived as an organizational identity threat and lead

organizational members to revisit and reconstruct their sense of organizational identity (Gioia, Corley and Schultz 2000). Consequently, outsiders' perception of the organizational identity may spur organizational change and call for actions among insiders to adjust the divergent identity narratives (Gioia et al. 2000; Elsback and Kramer 1996; Ravasi and Schulz 2006). Several narrative studies focus on the role and power of management in authoring the organizational identity (Boje 1995; Chreim 2005; Strangleman 1999). However, they also demonstrate that management's efforts to author a specific organizational identity are rarely incontestably adopted by organizational members (Harrison 2000; Humphreys and Brown 2002). Inspired by these studies, we aim to illustrate how members' at employee level counter, negotiate and rewrite 'who we are', and 'what we do' in the intersection between the media's and the management's dominating narratives. Thus, we contribute to the existing literature of the interplay between outsiders and insiders, who primarily tend to focus on the managements' efforts to counter the media's narrative of the organization (Ravasi and Schultz 2006).

Story work

Turning the attention towards the work of individuals in constructing identity and making sense of their work life experiences, we consider storytelling as a central part of how we construct and perform ourselves as individuals, groups and organizations (Mishler 1999; Linde 2001; Linde 2009; Driver 2009; Cunliffe and Coupland 2012). We adopt the term story work (Humle and Pedersen 2014) to emphasize the ongoing and open-ended processes of making sense of our experiences and construct different stories of self, others, the work and the organization. Not as finished, consistent or well-structured narratives but as responsive narrative performances (Cunliffe and Coupland 2012) connected to certain storytelling episodes/contexts and intertextually related to other story performances going on across time

and space. In this way, story work is perceived to be a relational and dynamic process of negotiating, describing and interpreting what has happened, what is going on at the moment, and what we anticipate or desire of the future. In addition, we claim that everyday work stories and the story work involved in constructing such stories are antenarrative and polyphonic (Humle 2014), in the sense that the construction of self, others, work and the organization is never finished. It is an ongoing process of negotiating and handling many potential and sometimes contradictory storylines simultaneously.

Therefore, we use the term story work to conceptualize how we navigate and make sense by allowing tensions and contradictions and by constantly introducing parallel stories and handling different storylines simultaneously. As such, the stories and the story work of individuals are constituted in the many conversations going on in and around organizations. It is a process of constantly reconstructing and negotiating - not only the past, present and future but multiple pasts, presents and futures (Jørgensen in Boje 2011). Thus, our interest is not only to explore how stories are fragmented and unfinished but also how some storylines are persistently pursued, and how shared meanings and understandings of e.g. organizational identity and the work done come into existence.

Counter-narratives

Bamberg and Andrews (2004, x) state that "[c]ounter-narratives only make sense in relation to something else, which they are countering. The very name identifies this as a positional category, in tension with another category" (Bamberg and Andrews 2004, x). This is similar to Linde's (2001; 2009) notion of counter-stories as a form of noisy silences "(…) accounts explicitly oppositional to specific, and usually more official, accounts" (Linde 2001; 2009). Linde has examined the role of counter-stories and claims that it is interesting to explore - not

only if they have a life within the organization they criticize but also whether or not they succeed in creating an ongoing counter-memory. Noisy silences are stories of issues, episodes and organizational histories that may not be spoken of officially but are spoken of or discussed nonetheless, they are: "What is saliently unsaid, hearably unsaid, what could be said but is not" (Linde 2009, 197). They are the unofficial stories of the organization and are often relatively unstructured.

In his study of Disney, Boje (1995; 2006) uses the play of Tamara as a metaphor for organizational life to describe how organizational storytelling is always in the making. "*Tamara* is open conversation as a multiplicity of minor narratives; small stories collectively and dynamically constitute, transform, and reform the storytelling organization. Instead of one character acting one story line, there is diversity, multiplicity, and difference (1995, 1031). The official stories narrated by Walt Disney effects organizational members and "dominate, socialize, and marginalize others' experience" (1995, 1031) and thus affects the story work of organizational members. However, simultaneously opposing counter-stories were being told "in other Disney rooms, and by tellers outside Disney's empire" (2006, 36), and the front-stage image of the organization was contested by "the emergence of the backstage (somewhat gossip) counter-stories (2006, 36) authored by e.g. journalists.

To advance our theoretical understanding of counter-narratives and their performative role in negotiating organizational identity and legitimacy, we build on the work of Bamberg and Andrews (2004) and Linde and make additions by combining it with Boje's (1995) work on counter-stories and antenarrative organizational storytelling to adopt a less narrow definition of counter-narratives. Thus, we are able to focus on stories that are in direct opposition to the official and dominating stories of the media and management but also the parallel stories

presenting alternative realities of organizational life without necessarily being in direct opposition to specific dominating narratives. Inspired by the work of Boje (1995; 2001; 2006; 2011), we study narratives and fragments of storytelling as a web of voices constantly constituting and negotiating organizational identity (Humle 2014). In this way, we are able to avoid the static dichotomy between master and counter-narrative and still use the concept of counter-stories (Linde 2001; 2009) as a valuable tool in studying the tensions between official, dominant and discursively powerful voices of e.g. management and the media and the constant struggle of organizational members in making sense of their everyday work life and negotiating individual and collective organizational identity constructions. Combining the work of Linde and Boje, it is of interest to study - not only the story work that goes into performing critical counter-stories - but also what kind of organizational counter-memories or "realities" they form and facilitate.

Generation of empirical data

This paper is based on a case study of a highly contested organization, E-rail, a European National Rail Service. In image rankings, E-rail was always found among the five least attractive organizations and has been subject to several public 'scandals'. In 2000, they purchased new trains, which turned out to be so flawed that they were unable to run. Today, using the worn trains means recurrent delays, which causes angry customers. Moreover, E-rail's financial conducts have been criticized as the organization had run a deficit from 2007-2011. Most notably, E-rail is often portrayed in the media as an illegitimate provider of public transportation due to poor service. (The media's presentation of E-rail is elaborated in the beginning of the findings section)

Ticket inspectors were selected as primary participants of the study, as they can be regarded as the frontline face of the organization vis-à-vis the customers. Ticket inspectors are often the sole representative of their organization in critical situations, where they more or less successful try to uphold a service-oriented spirit in interactions with frustrated, angry and sometimes threatening customers. Besides checking the tickets (this was in fact not first priority) the ticket inspectors' work comprise of safety matters, selling food and beverages from a small sales trolley, providing traffic information and cleaning the trains. They often work alone or in teams consisting of two or three colleagues – depending on the size of the train. A union representative described them as "free range birds" as they worked without direct supervision. The lack of direct supervision also meant that the ticket collectors had the sole responsibility for making the right decision and taking action in critical situations such as acute illness among passengers, violence or vandalism on the trains, or in case of accidents such as suicidal jumping in front of the train.

The following analysis is primarily based on interviews with 20 ticket inspectors. The overall case study also comprises of observations and recordings of four information meetings, 10 hours of shadowing on the trains as well as a collection of corporate information material, power points, employee magazines and newsletters from the union. News articles of events leading up to the time of study have been collected as well. The 20 interviews were all tape-recorded and lasted from 49 minutes to 2 hours and 41 minutes. In total, the interviews lasted 26 hours and 13 minutes, on average 1 hour and 18 minutes. The interview guide was semi-structured and inspired by Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan 1954 in Czarniawska 2004), which is a set of flexible principles designed to direct the conversation toward concrete episodes and situations. The technique assists in producing rich elaborations on sometimes short or generalized answers. It made the ticket inspectors refer to specific experiences on the

trains and interactions with customers, management or outsiders. It proved a useful approach to get the respondents to talk about their work and practices in a detailed manner. More details on the case study can be found in Frandsen (2015).

Analysis of the empirical material

We adopt a broad and non-restrictive definition of narratives, and we incorporate many different kinds of story performances in our analysis. Some of them are full-blown narratives with a plot, beginning, middle and end (BME narratives, Boje 2001; 2006). Others are fragmented stories, unfinished pieces of story work related to other conversations and always in the making. Furthermore, we acknowledge all types of statements to have narrative qualities in the sense that they are part of the on-going story work of organizational members as they go about making sense of their work life experiences. With this definition, it is possible to work with different kinds of stories, story fragments and story performances that are not necessarily well-structured or fully performed as BME narratives to capture the on-going and open-ended nature of organizational storytelling.

The analytical process was inspired by Riessman's (2008) narrative approach, focusing on the thematic, structural and performative characteristics of the story work of ticket inspectors as they shared stories of everyday work situations during interviews. The interviews were coded in Nvivo by using open codes to label the themes narrated by the participant. The thematic analysis was conducted to explore important counter-story themes across the story work of the ticket inspectors as they related their stories of everyday work life in and around the trains to the dominating narratives of the media and management. We found horizontal (across interviews) clusters of themes organized around the contestation of the notion of 'service'; 1) "Media's presentation of service" and 2) "service as naturally occurring" countering the

media's dominant narrative, 3) "service and time pressure" and 4) "service as the future of E-rail" countering the management's dominant narrative and finally 5) "service as loss of status" in which the ticket inspectors counter themselves. The clusters of themes were examined in more details with focus on the structural characteristics. Here we used Greimas' actantial model to analyze the material with the specific purpose of understanding the participants' self-positioning and positioning of other central characters.

Greimas' actantial model is based on Propp's analyses of folktales to understand the plot structure underlying fiction. The model consists of three axes: the quest axis connecting the subject and the object. The subject aspires towards a goal – the object. The subject has helpers and opponents in achieving this goal; these actants are organized around the conflict axis. The sender and the receiver are organized around the communication axis illustrating a transportation of the object from the sender to the receiver, with the receiver in some cases being the subject.

[INSERT FIGURE 5.1 HERE]

Greimas' actantial model was originally produced to analyze the structure of narratives in fictions. However, other studies have demonstrated its use in analyzing organizational narratives (Czarniawska 2004; Søderberg 2003; Wang and Robert, 2005). The actantial model has potential for depicting the characters' narrative positions and linking those positions illustrative of the power relations. Wang and Robert (2005) argue that Greimas' actantial model is valuable in understanding individuals' identity constructions, while Søderberg (2003) demonstrates its usefulness in illustrating similarities and differences in sense-making of the same organizational events. In our case, we use the actantial model to analyze how different voices – the media, management and employees – position themselves and others

when elaborating on the quest of providing E-rails customers with good customer experiences. Furthermore, the actantial model demonstrates how ticket inspectors in different sets or clusters of counter-narratives adopt, challenge or rewrite their subject positions. The structural analysis is, thus, in our paper applied to demonstrate the performative character of the counter-narratives: How the ticket inspectors as members of a story-telling community use counter-narratives in their story work to establish and maintain a sense of identity and legitimacy despite identity threats, ambiguities and contradictions inherent in their role.

Findings

E-rail is a public organization, which has been faced with crisis during the past five years - both financially and regarding an increasing public mistrust. Extensive negative media coverage has portrayed the organization as an illegitimate provider of public transportation due to poor service. The presentation of the results in the following section begins with a brief presentation of the media's and the management's dominating narratives. This is done to contextualize - our primary interest - the ticket inspectors' story work and make it possible to study how these powerful voices interrelate and affect the story work of the ticket inspectors.

The media's dominant narrative of E-rail

Over a period of at least five years, the media consistently position E-rail as a greedy, unfair, unprofessional organization. Stories of overcrowded, delayed or dirty trains often feature in the press and portray E-rail as incapable of delivering a 'proper' service to their customers. In this morass, the ticket inspectors are hailed as E-rails evil henchmen. One of the major national tabloid newspapers, T.P. , in particular, ran a series about the conducts of ticket inspectors. A selection of the headlines illustrates the dominating narratives

- "E-rail locked me up" about a 12-year-old allegedly locked up while the ticket inspector fined her for not having her ticket ready (T.P. 24.08.2010)

- "E-rail mistake sent me to prison" about a commuter who bought a ticket in a ticket machine, which printed flawed numbers, resulting in the commuter being handed over from the ticket inspectors to the police (T.P. 30.08.2010)

- "E-rail's ticket inspector tore hair from my head" about a ticket collector who allegedly tried to establish order in the children's' section by pulling a six-year-old boy by his hair back to his seat (T.P. 2.08. 2010)

- "Brain-damaged boy kicked off the train three times" about a handicapped boy being asked to leave the train because the ticket inspectors believed him to be older than the 14 years allowed on this child's ticket (T.P. 28.03.2011)

- "You are flippant and a cheat: Ticket inspector to a mentally retarded girl" about a mentally handicapped 16-year-old girl, who was verbally abused by a ticket inspector (T.P. 3.04.2011).

In these articles, the customers are positioned as the active subjects wanting customer service (the object). E-rail is positioned as the potential sender of the customer service to the customer (the potential receiver), however the ticket inspectors, who are positioned as the opponents, obstruct this quest for the customer, who instead receives poor customer service. As a result, the customers are clearly marked as the victims in these stories. The stories were all accompanied by bold headlines and graphic pictures showing, for instance, the (now partly bald) scalp of the six-year-old boy. These stories appear on multiple media platforms along with follow-up stories, background stories and letters from readers. The media attention is intense and the narratives of the evil ticket inspectors, who are treating their customers poorly,

fining everyone and kicking the weakest passengers of the trains, are repeated over and over again.

Management's dominating (counter-)narrative of E-rail

The way management communicates in the media during the smear campaigns is interesting to notice. Their voice is an important and powerful voice of the storytelling community of E-rail and often opposed or referred to by ticket inspectors in their story work. In the story about the 12-year-old girl being locked up, a deputy director explains: "We do a lot to make our customers happy, but sometimes, our employees have a bad day (…). I will take it seriously as this is, of course, not a method that we use. Furthermore, we certainly do not instruct our personnel to do such things" (Deputy Director, T.P. , 24.08.2010). In a follow-up article "Now E-rail offers Julie psychological counselling", the deputy director is quoted again: "That we have a guest, a 12-year-old girl, who feels she has been treated badly, this makes me truly sad, I am sad on behalf of the girl as well as on behalf of the employee, who feels bad about this case and is miserable that Julie has had this experience." He announced that E-rail would make a comprehensive investigation of the case: "We will interview her [the ticket inspector] thoroughly and repeatedly. Right now it is one person's word against another's, but let us wait and see what happens" (Deputy Director, T.P. 28.8.2010).

In this article, E-rail is firmly established as the sender of customer service (object) to the customer (receiver), by management positioning itself as the active subject in the quest of providing good customer service. The ticket inspectors are, however, still positioned as opponents obstructing the quest, while the managerial rules and investigations are positioned as helpers. Management emphasizes how ticket inspectors 'can have a bad day' and do not follow the (managerial dictated) 'rules', and how the particular inspector referred to should be

interviewed 'thoroughly and repeatedly'. Thus, they aim at breaking with the established 'truth' in the media's dominating narrative, but they refrain from changing the position of the ticket inspectors as opponents. They rather position themselves as the active subject saving the day and preventing this from happening again.

The extensive negative media coverage led to new strategic considerations on behalf of management, who decided to launch a new 'service concept' labelled Service A-B-C. The service concept requires a substantial shift in the professional identity of ticket inspectors. A member of the management team explained at the first meeting: "We are going through a shift in our culture and priorities. We are no longer to control tickets but to provide a service instead. … Riding the train without a ticket no longer leads to a fine. The most important thing is that everyone has a pleasant journey, including those who do not pay. […] Society around us is changing. Therefore, we must change, too. Our customers expect more. They will no longer tolerate being abandoned on the next station because they do not have a ticket" (Notes from meeting). Here the management uses the including 'we' implying that management and ticket inspectors work as united subjects ensuring that a proper service is provided to the customers, who 'expect more'. Because of this new concept, ticket inspectors are now required to not only check tickets and ensure safety matters on the trains, but also – and this is in fact the first priority – provide service by using the sales trolley. The sales trolley, similar to the food trolleys on airplanes, are according to the management at the core of the new service offerings to the customers on the trains. Service guidelines are described in minute details in a 'service guide' booklet. Meanwhile, substantial cuts are made to the personnel on the trains, and new electronic equipment is subsequently introduced in order for the ticket inspectors to inspect electronic tickets. However, the electronic equipment has,

according to the ticket inspectors, the dual function of not only advancing efficiency but also to monitor the ticket inspectors' performance.

The ticket inspectors' counter-narratives

Turning our attention to the ticket inspectors, we have identified clusters of counter-narratives in the interview texts focusing on a) countering the media, b) countering the management and c) countering the employees themselves. Each cluster of the counter-narratives comprises of story work, which both directly counter the dominating narratives narrated by the media or management, and the story work proposing alternative worldviews and understandings of the organizational identity of E-rail. Thus, the counter narratives enable the co-existence of multiple narrations of "who we are" and "what we do". Service is a central matter of concern in all the counter-narratives. However, the analyses conducted by using the actantial model show that the understanding of what service is and who provides it – is far from static or fixed. Instead, there is a constant struggle of defining what service is, who provides the service, who opposes, and who assists. In the following sections, the different types of counter-narratives are presented.

Countering the media - opposing the media narrative

One type of counter-story often performed by the ticket inspectors opposes the dominating media narrative of the ticket inspector as E-rails evil henchmen treating their customers poorly, fining everyone and kicking off the weakest passengers. These stories specifically oppose the images presented by the media of e.g. the girl who was allegedly locked up by a female ticket inspector:

There was this case in [name of city] (…). It was one of my really, really good colleagues. I went to school with her. She was head of the Red Cross in [name of city]. That sort of tells you something about the kind of person she is (…) She locked up this girl. However, she had not. Not at all. However, all of us know this girl's mother. She is a real bitch to be honest. It ended up on the front page of T.P. , and the management of E-rail reacted by hauling her over the coals. They simply hauled her over the coals, so she had to take sick leave. This is management doing this. Moreover, in the end there was nothing to the story. She did not lock anyone up, and she was subjected to grueling examination. It was good front-page material. But oh – [management is] reluctant to deal with T.P. and all that, so they do not stand up for their people. They do not. (Eva)

The story of the girl who was locked up was frequently told in the interviews (without being prompted), also by ticket inspectors who did not know the ticket inspector in question. The narrative refers to what seems to be a significant event, creating a shared frame of reference and understandings of the situation and its implication. Although there are variations of the story, there are three main storylines persistently pursued across storytelling episodes: a) the ticket inspector was simply doing her job. "Why are we to be hunted down because we are just doing our job? That is probably what was most annoying to me and most painful to the staff" (André), b) the media are only out to get you. "They went to the press with this story, and then the snowball started rolling. They began to dig out old stories. It was truly a crusade against E-rail, and of course, also against our colleague." (Maria). c) Management did not stand up for her in the media "You would expect that our company would counter the story, but it is apparently company policy that you do not discuss things through the newspaper. " (Noah).

Applying Greimas' actantial model to the counter-narratives opposing the media, we see that the protagonist and active subject is narrated as the ticket inspector who simply wants to do her job, which in this case is understood as fining and reprimanding a passenger without a ticket. Implicitly, E-rail remains in the fixed position of the sender and the customer the receiver, however the ticket inspector is narrated as a person that is left on her/his own without support in battling - not only customers' misbehavior but also the negative press and management denouncing the ticket inspectors. There is no one assigned the position as helper in these narratives, management is narrated as the anticipated helper, but one that turns out to be an opponent as they leave the media's accusations against the ticket inspectors unquestioned. In their story work, many of the ticket inspectors mention that the ticket inspector involved in the episode had to be on a sick leave for a long period after the incident.

Countering the media - narrating an alternative identity of the service-worker

Another cluster of stories often performed by the ticket inspectors during interviews oppose the dominating narratives of the media portraying the ticket inspectors as providing poor customer service, fining and mistreating the weakest massagers without necessarily referencing to specific episodes or incidents. In these story performances, the ticket inspectors primarily construct themselves in opposition to this negative image by accentuating their roles as 'service-workers' and as dedicated people taking pride in doing the job well and providing a good service to the customers.

> I have had some nice conversations on the train with people. I like to tell people, when I walk through, for example, 'oh, this is really beautiful, what you are knitting'. Then we have a short [moment] (…). I have noticed when I do things

like that, when I praise a small child, it spreads. Then others might have listened, so the next people you meet - you have already established a good communication with them. Then somebody can say – this is not real, but for me it is real. For me this is who I am. (Lillian)

I have even accomplished, when we come home at night, and we have been delayed if they (customers) have not reached the last bus, I have given old ladies a lift home. I could be completely indifferent ... (...) People who need to go to a funeral, who we get there on time. Yes, we really, really pull many chestnuts out of the fire, which never come to E-rails knowledge. I do not expect to get any extra acknowledgement or extra pat on the back, I see it as part of my job, and I consider it as a huge challenge and a mega-advantage of my job, that I can do these things. (Noah)

Providing good service is often narrated as something natural and frequently occurring: "I think, I do it all the time – help with the luggage if it is an old lady, because it doesn't say, that we have to do this. I help with a stroller, we are not expected to do that either. I think that is the little extra thing." (Anna). Furthermore, as in this example, service is often constructed as something extra not expected of the ticket inspectors as part of their formal obligations or job description. In these types of story performances, the service work is described as defining who the service workers are as individuals. "For me this is who I am" and as a group of employees "we really, really pull a lot of chestnuts out of the fire", often *we* signifies 'the ticket inspectors' as oppose to E-rail and management – "which never comes to E-rail's knowledge". The ticket inspectors own discretion and ability to bend the rules is narrated as vital helpers in providing good service, "that is the good thing about being here – the level of

freedom. We can bend the rules, as we like." (Martin)

Applying Greimas' actantial model to the counter-narratives makes an alternative understanding of 'who we are'. In the story work, positioning themselves as 'service workers', the ticket inspectors are the main subjects wanting to provide good customer experiences (objects) to the customers (receivers) in the name of E-rail (sender). They highlight their freedom, their own discretion and ability to bend the rules as necessary in providing "the little extra". The customers are given a superior position as people who should be 'pleased' in all situations. In these counter-narratives, there are very few explicit positioning of an opponent and conflicts are toned down to naturalize the alternative narration of *who we are,* by accentuating that this is how it has always been. The counter-narratives of the ticket inspectors as *service workers* stands in stark contrast to the dominating media narratives positioning the ticket inspectors as someone who treats the customers poorly and unethically.

Countering management - opposing the management's narrative

As illustrated above, the ticket inspectors often oppose the negative image constructed by the media and instead perform themselves as workers dedicated to provide good service. Related to these stories, the ticket inspectors simultaneously counter the dominating narratives of management where management position themselves as heroes who ensure a good customer service by their initiatives of e.g. introducing the sales trolley, a new service manual, and adjusting the rules. Counter to this, the empirical material consists of many everyday work stories of ticket inspectors' where management is constructed as the opponents in the quest of providing good customer experiences. These stories are about how the ticket inspectors, though they do their best, cannot provide superior customer service, because management

pushes them to become more (time) efficient and makes rules and regulations that do not match the everyday work conditions or ideals of the ticket inspectors:

> I have told some of our managers that I am afraid that we are going to snap at some of the customers out there because we are a little short-tempered. Because we might try to achieve more than we can, and E-rail also says that we must learn to realize that we cannot do it all, even though we have got a nice little book telling us how to prioritize. (...) However, I guess I have an idea that I should try to do it all. Then I get a little snippy. I did that last week. Last week, I had one [passenger] who should have a discount. (...) There has been a lot [of new types of tickets], and I probably have a little difficulty in remembering the different types, and I could not find the code that I needed. (...). I stood there and was about to boil over because I was busy, and I was getting off at [name of city], and this was right before [this city]. Without asking her, I just take her phone and show it to my colleagues in the crew compartment. It is right next-door. Therefore, I will just take it and slip out to ask my colleagues who are out there. What do I do? They also looked at it, and one said she do not get a discount on that, it is only in the metropolitan area. Then I went back to her, and she was all mad at me because I had taken her phone without asking. I did not realize that I had done something wrong by taking it with me. 'It was not satisfactory that I took her phone', she gave me a rant. Then I tell her that I had to ask a colleague for advice, and then I say that I cannot find the ID from the text message. (...) Thus, she did not get discount. Moreover, the way I was apologizing to her was probably not as wholeheartedly. (Maria)

In this piece of story work, the ticket inspector narrates herself as someone who wants to do her job and provide a good customer experience. However, she is prevented from doing this because of the managements' new initiatives, added time pressure and more complicated work tasks in her job on the train, which leave her overworked, stressed and short-tempered. This narrative starts out positioning her discretion to solve the problem as the helper in enabling her to provide service. Though this is not received well by the customer, thus the ticket inspector 'snaps' back and shifts her focus towards management as opponents – holding management responsible for the incident. E-rail is narrated as synonym with management, and thus exclusive of the ticket inspectors' 'we' in this quote. The divide between 'us' as ticket inspectors and 'them' as management are significant in these counter-narratives. Management are often positioned as the opponents of providing good service as they, according to the conception of the ticket inspectors, ignore the human factor and are only preoccupied with standardization and efficiency. By this conduct they question if E-rail (excluding the ticket inspectors) should be a legitimate provider (sender) of good customer service (object) to the customer (receiver).

The ticket inspectors instead narrate themselves as concerned with helping the passengers and taking their different predispositions and needs as human beings into considerations:

> However, we work with people. Not boxes or things to be painted, which run on the assembly line. It is Mr. And Mrs. Smith, it is little Louise and Peter and Christian with cats and dogs, prams and bicycles. It is like in hospitals. You cannot write that it takes Ms Smith 10 seconds to climb aboard and multiply by 200. Some people need much help - others do not. (...) Some spend all our time. (Daniel)

The narratives of 'failed' customer service portrays the ticket inspector as the hero, trying to provide good customer service, but is prevented from it by the opponent management, due to 'their' new rules, service guidelines and added time pressure.

Countering the management - narrating an alternative identity of E-rail

In the ticket inspectors' story work, they do not only position themselves as 'service workers' but also as heroes saving the future of E-rail. These counter-narratives counter management narration of service as driving the sales trolley and following the guideline. The counter-narratives should also be analyzed in the light of internal talk about outsourcing or downsizing the entire department of service personnel on the trains. While this is an acute threat, it is not very explicit in this cluster of counter-narratives and often the 'us'/'them' conflict is downplayed and a more inclusive 'we' signifying the entire organizational is used. In these narratives, the ticket inspectors suggest a variety of alternative understandings of what it means to provide service as legitimization of why they are needed on the trains – also in the future:

> The role of the ticket inspector is – and this is still fundamental in my view of the terminology and soul in relation to the company – it is to take care of our customers. In addition, the concept is, of course, having to talk to Mr. And Mrs. Smith, when they get into the train. Give them the appreciation, when you come and ask for their ticket because they have spent time and effort to buy it, and there are many people who consider it as a kind of appreciation, that we are present. The next problem is to take care of those who do not have their ticket, and it is to defend the interests of the company because if we were not there,

people could just travel free, and those who do have a ticket, feel cheated if those who do not have tickets will not be confronted. (Daniel)

I believe that the customers are extremely pleased with us. I often speak to our customers about how the future scenario may look like. We often hear this song, "there is never any service here" or "oh, now you have the time to check my ticket? I have been sitting here for two hours". Then I take the time to talk to people about how the scenario would be [without us]. (…) There is certainly no help for the disabled, senior citizens, and those with heavy suitcases. Moreover, when you talk to people, you can see that they become almost wild in their eyes "this must never happen." I have a feeling that people like that we are out there. They want us there. (Brian)

In terms of Greimas' actantial model, the narrative structure of the counter-narratives proposing an alternative understanding of "what we do", and "who we are" follows a similar structure to the other sets of counter-narratives, in which the ticket inspectors position themselves as active subjects working to provide good customer experiences (object) to the customer (receiver) on behalf of E-rail (sender). In narrating an alternative understanding of "what we do", the ticket inspectors highlight ticketing as a way of providing service, similar to helping those in need and providing the little extra (as helpers). As such, they argue that they are in fact 'wanted' on the trains and comprise the very 'soul' of E-rail. The management as opponent is rather implicit in these narratives, again downplaying the conflict suggesting that this is a more 'natural' or institutionalized way of understanding the role. Implicitly, the counter-narratives do refer to the perceived threat of being laid off from E-rail by downsizing.

Ticket inspectors countering their own stories

The previously presented counter-narratives appear to be grounded in a certain narrative practice signifying the importance of the storytelling community created among ticket inspectors, where the narratives are told, refined, and polished. They seem well rehearsed and 'finished', everyone follows the same actantial structure and fixed positioning of ticket inspectors, customers and management. These counter-narratives, we propose, have a stabilizing effect and emerge as powerful sense-making narratives successfully co-existing with the media and management's dominating narratives and creating a parallel "reality" among ticket inspectors. The interviews, however, also reveal a different type of counter-narratives in the ticket inspectors' story work that is more subtle, fragmented and less rehearsed. They follow a different actantial model and position the ticket inspector and customers differently. Furthermore, they are counter-narratives to the ticket inspectors' collective understandings of 'who we are', and 'what we do'. These stories are about misbehaving or even threatening customers:

> Especially young people who have been at the pub, and then you will inspect their ticket. As a woman, you may well face unpleasant expressions like "dirty whore". (Maria)

> However, it does happen quite often that people spit at us. It is an ugly experience, but I guess it says more about them than it does about us. It is still you who are being attacked, though. (Noah)

> Researcher: "You got slapped in the face?". "Yes, when I was about to exit the train. He hit me with his elbow so that glasses came off and were destroyed. It evolved a little more than it should have done". (André)

The counter storylines of misbehaving customers are found in almost all the interviews. However, they are often just hinted at or shortly touched upon. Often, they are fragments of storytelling and not full-blown retrospective narratives like many of the stories presented earlier.

The customers are no longer named customers but rather 'people' or 'society'. Despite the severeness of the situations narrated – pregnant ticket inspectors being kicked, ticket inspectors being threatened with knives or guns, ticket inspectors being physically attacked on the train or the platforms - the frequency is often downplayed "I have been here for 25 years and I have never had any remotely violent experience". It appears as if it is difficult to find a 'place' for these types of counter narratives in their own dominating stories of the customers in the position of 'the one to please'.

The ticket inspector's position as a hero is challenged in these counter-narratives and the ticket inspector is portrayed as a victims. They argue that their authority as a ticket inspector has been eroded due to the increased demands of providing service.

> Earlier, there was an authority of being a ticket inspector. People listened to you, but it is not like that anymore. If on top of that, they [more experienced ticket inspectors] also need to go with a sales trolley and put up with the many pertinent comments from the audience, who think we are stupid. (Eva)

I have also been spat upon. They shall not do that. They shall not touch me, and

they shall not spit on me. That they call me a stupid bitch, I do not care. You

can easily shake that off. Researcher: Does that happen often?

Anna: Yes. There was one the other day - because I told him that it was his

responsibility to have a proper ticket "but there must be some service on the

train, and I had to get my act together and provide service" - "well, I cannot buy

your ticket for you". The man who spat on me, it was very close and right in my

face, and then he ended up leaving. He said that he would kill me as he walked

out of the train. You think about it for a few days, but then it is over. It is not me

– it is the uniform, and you must always remember that. I am just doing my job.

(Anna)

In both examples, 'providing service' is evoked as something eroding the authority of ticket

inspectors. The passengers are positioned as misbehaving, violent or threatening people,

preventing the ticket inspectors from "doing their jobs".

Applying Greimas' actantial model, the narrative structure of the counter-narratives

challenging their own dominating narratives is similar to the counter-narratives opposing the

media, and they share the victimization of the ticket inspectors and stress that the ticket

inspectors are being subject to unfair treatment by the press (in the previous examples) or by

the 'people' or 'audience' in the present examples. Again we see, that E-rail is implicitly

positioned as the sender of customer service (object) to the customer (receiver). However,

here the customers position as the 'superior' receiver, 'the one to please' is destabilized, as

'passengers' and 'providing service' are described as opponents to the ticket inspectors' quest

of doing their jobs. In contrast to the counter-narratives specifically opposing the media, the role of management is conspicuously silent in these types of stories. No one is identified as helpers, and the ticket inspectors are portraying themselves as being 'alone' without any help battling the misbehaving customers. The notion of working alone is constructed notably differently than in the earlier examples where being independent and autonomous made the job interesting and rewarding while simultaneously allowing the ticket inspectors to do that little extra thing, provide good service and incorporate the human aspect of dealing with customers into their everyday work.

Discussion

In this paper, we see organizations as a story-telling communities (Linde 2001; 2009; Boje 2001) and contribute by highlighting the role of dominant and counter-narratives in organizational identity formation processes as a web of stories (Humle 2013) performed and negotiated by organizational members and external stakeholders, here exemplified by the voice of the media. The counter-narratives presented in this paper demonstrate how the ticket inspectors directly draw upon, negotiate and challenge the externally narrated, yet dominating narratives of the organization. In particular, the notion of *customer service* emerges as a contested space. Performing stories directly counter to the dominating narratives of the media and management the ticket inspectors are occupied with setting the stories of outsiders and insiders straight (Boje 1995) – negotiating through their everyday story work alternative answers to important questions of e.g. "who provide service?"; "Who assists and who obstructs the quest of providing good service?". This is a constant process of negotiating many possible storylines and different actantial positions. The ticket inspectors explicitly draw upon and counter the media's dominating narrative of the organization, yet they also use counter-narratives to construct an alternative 'reality'. While some counter-narratives appear

relatively fixed and finished, a set of more subtle and fragmented counter-narratives were also detected. In these more fragmented and antenarrative counter-stories the ticket inspectors were countering themselves by constructing and positioning customers not as the ones to help and positively attend to by providing good service, but as rude and violent opponents making everyday work troublesome and difficult to cope with. On the basis of these findings, our case study contributes in several ways to extend the current understanding of counter-narratives and their roles in organizational identity formation and storytelling community dynamics and complexities.

Theoretical contributions

First, the findings enhance our existing knowledge on counter-narratives by demonstrating that the tension between dominant and counter-narratives are visible in different actantial positioning of organizational actors. In the empirical material there are examples of stories narrated by media, management and the ticket inspectors referring to the same event, as in the example of the episode of the 12 year old girl being locked up by a ticket inspector, however the positioning of subjects, helpers and villains shifts and classes. The stories have the same fabula but different syuzhets (see Scheffel (2010) for the distinction between fabula and syuzhets). In this way the actantial model enables us to explore the performative aspects of the story work of organizational members and illustrate how the negotiation of meaning between dominant and counter-narratives is in part about casting heroes, helpers and villains in syuzhets. Thus the characters of dominant and counter-narratives are often the same (customers, ticket inspectors, management ect.) yet they are appointed variating actantial positions and different understandings of possible intensions, motives and possibilities of actions are produced. Utilizing the actantial model in analysing the relationship between dominant and counter-narratives enable us to see that one important defining features of

counter-narratives is the creative re-casting or re-placement of actantial positions against the ones prescribed by dominant narratives.

Second, the findings demonstrate how counter-narratives produce parallel, yet rather stable, understandings of the organizational identity. The performance of counter-narratives created shared references and alternative, differing understandings opposing the dominant identity narratives told by the media and management resulting in co-existing, parallel understandings of 'who we are'. Simultaneously, a relatively fixed positioning of heroes, villains, opponents and helpers by both organizational members and external stakeholders (e.g. the media) created opposing yet rather stable understandings of the organizational identity. Previous studies of organizational image and identity (Dutton and Duckerich 1991; Elsback and Kramer 1996; Ravasi and Schultz 2006; Gioia et al. 2000) tend to focus on organizational level changes and efforts to convert the organizational image. Gioia et al. (2000) used the term adaptive instability to describe the mutual influencing alignment of self-definition with the environment. However, this study shows no evidence of successful organizational transformation as a result of the dominating, negative media narrative. Instead the study bears witness of a different set of organizational dynamics rooted in the counter-narratives creating co-existing, multiple (and even conflicting) understandings of organizational identity in on-going processes of establishing a sense of continuity and stability. As such this study similar to Linde (2009) suggests that the counter-narratives creates pluralistic understandings of 'who we are'. Multiple storylines and understandings co-exists in an un-folding Tamara conversation taking place across time and space constantly negotiating the identity of the organization, the members' role and work, and central organizational phenomena like 'customer service'.

Third, the findings illuminate the important role of counter-narratives in establishing and maintaining a storytelling community among the organizational members. The sharing of counter-narratives allows the ticket inspectors to collectively make sense of their role, the organization and their everyday work by introducing different measurements of success and understandings of what it means to provide good service in a period of time where a positive narration of the organizational identity is under pressure. Paradoxically, by constantly referring to the dominant narratives of the media and management the counter-narratives keeps the dominant narratives alive and consolidate their dominant power (for more see Gabriel's chapter in this book), yet by telling and re-telling the counter-narratives the *counter-narratives* gain the authority (Kuhn in this book) to guide the members meaning making and behaviours. The counter-narratives does not only counter but also almost marginalize the dominating narratives of management and the media, thus facilitating the co-existence of multiple storylines of 'who we are'. The sharing of counter-narratives enables the ticket inspectors to successfully form an 'us' against 'them', protecting the members against accusations and creating a shared sense of community among the ticket inspectors, who largely work independently on the train. The parallel understandings of the 'who they are' and 'what they do' allow the ticket inspectors to gather around more productive and positive notions of their role and everyday work to establish a positive storytelling community. While the media and management predominantly positions the ticket inspectors as deviant villains, the ticket inspectors' story work enables them to collectively navigate these dominant narratives and through counter-narratives create positive self-positionings, protecting their self-image and increasing their space of action (Holmer-Nadesan1996). Future research may, however, seek to more fully understand how a community solely engaged in counter-narrative story work may experience a negative closure, which leaves little space for narratives positive towards the management and organization as a whole.

Fourth, the study of the ticket inspectors at E-rail illustrates the significant and necessary role of counter-narratives in producing meaning and positive collective identities. As such the counter-stories of our study is different than the 'noisy silences' described by Linde (2009) as they display an ability to not only counter the official stories of the organization but to give voice to alternative understandings, which may not 'win' over the dominant narratives yet still significantly challenge their authoritative status. However, we also encountered more subtle, fragmented, antenarrative counter-stories related to the misbehaving customers and the ticket inspectors as victims of abuse on the trains. These stories were 'noisy silences' often only hinted at or partly told, rarely shared as full blown BME narratives. The fragile counter-narratives opposing the ticket inspectors' stable and well rehearsed counter-narratives remained 'silenced', because they opposed the collectively narrated positive self-positioning of ticket inspectors as heroes. Yet, they were 'noisy' because the painful and disturbing events, though not easy to talk about, continued to be a part of the everyday life of the ticket inspectors and thus difficult to completely disregard. The 'noisy silences' of the ticket inspectors direct our attention to the dynamic, fragmented and polyphonic nature of story work, which at times, particularly when working with interview transcripts, emerge as a form of 'cognitive dissonance' (see Czarniawska's chapter in this book), however also bearing evidence of the construction of multiple storylines intersecting in on-going Tamara conversations. Other examples are when the ticket inspectors tell counter-narratives about themselves as exclusive of 'E-rail' – 'E-rail' signifying management, and simultaneously as central organizational members and saviours of 'E-rail's' future. Or when they narrate themselves as free, independent, autonomous agents, and simultaneously as dupes of management's initiatives and increased control. The image of the organization as a Tamara-conversation enables us to see the multiplicity of potential storylines being narrated and

performed across time and space some more elaborated or visible and others more fragile and disclosed.

Methodological contributions

Besides these theoretical contributions our case study also provides methodological insights into the empirical work with counter-narratives. While dominant and counter-narratives in some cases may be easily distinguishable, our case study shows how media, management and the ticket inspectors all engage in dominant and counter storytelling, and thus the categories of dominant and counter-narratives becomes blurred and more of an analytical distinction than an empirical observation. Even so in our analysis it became clear that the ticket inspectors story work was intertextually related to and often constructed in direct opposition or 'response' to the dominant narratives of the media and management. The dominant voices of the media and management served as a backdrop against which the ticket inspectors positioned themselves as organizational members. Further the dynamics of dominating and counter-narratives was embedded in complex and sometimes reversed processes of everyday storytelling practices. When studying both stabilizing and dynamic aspects of organizational storytelling this leads to methodological and analytical challenges in deciding when something is dominating or counter, The division between the two, if one is not careful, easily leads to simplified or static portraits of storytelling practices not adequately describing the everyday story work of organizational members as they struggle to make sense of their experiences and negotiate different notions of 'who they are' and 'what they do' as individual, groups and organizations. Taking this into consideration the conceptual framework of dominating and counter-narratives still proved useful in explicating how different voices and notions become dominating in the sense that they construct powerful positioning of organizational members not easily ignored. At the same time the counter –

storytelling practices of the ticket inspectors in our case form a strong opposition almost marginalizing the stories of management.

Practical contributions

Previous research has argued that negative perceptions of outsiders would serve as a mirror for the organizational identity formation and often prompt organizational members to revise the organizational identity in the eyes of both 'outsiders' *and* 'insiders'. (Dutton and Duckerich 1991; Gioia et al. 2000; Hatch and Schultz 2002). In this paper, we illustrate that such collective organizational 'soul-searching' and change may not automatically follow a public discredited image. As the dominant and counter-narratives repeatedly maintain a relatively stable, oppositional actantial positioning and sjuzhets, the different parties appear to naturalize different, opposing world views and conceptions of organizational identities. These different notions does not seem to intersect or blend, but instead co-exists in parallel, yet on-going struggles over meaning. The counter-narrative storytelling practices of ticket inspectors enables them to handle the negative stories of the media and management, however it does not succeed in challenging the dominant narratives and change the negative conceptions of external stakeholders such as the media and customers. The prospective of E-rail significantly changing the discrediting dominant narratives thus seem small as of now. Taking this into consideration we advice practitioners to pay close attention the story work of organizational members and their positioning of themselves and others - to engage in more productive and collaborative definitions of "who we are" and "what we do" making the battle of a negative external conception of the organization a mutual one.

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